

Moshekwa Langa

Homeland

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There is something very laid-back, almost uncaring, about Moshekwa Langa's photographs. At a casual glance – or at least the glance given to press release-sized reproductions – one might automatically assume them to be made with a large-format camera: They speak in the visual dialect of contemporary documentary photography, that is, they are very understated, static, depict very ordinary things (...a table lamp, waste paper basket, a clothes dryer...) and are pronounced with topographic objectivity. However, on closer inspection, the exquisite detail in the prints that the viewer is hoping to see explodes into digitised sharpening, visible JPEG compression, and all sorts of other technical faux pas that I have no interest in going into at great length. Let it be said that Langa's irreverent technical approach to this sort of subject (things which would quite happily sit still and could happily be photographed 'properly') is highly unorthodox, and is for me at least, strangely satisfying.

Now living in Amsterdam, Langa made these works over a series of visits back to his hometown Bakenberg in South Africa where he was born. Like many small towns in South Africa (and the world-over for that matter), Langa was one of many young people who leave their hometown to discover the outside world. For Langa it was to study art, but for most it is down to the obvious economic lure of the big cities. The result is that many homes – like the ones that Langa grew-up in, and which are depicted here – are left unoccupied (not deserted, however) for long periods of time. This peculiar situation is evident in Langa's photographs. The homes are not ransacked nor do they show any signs that the occupiers were in a hurry to leave; there is more subtlety to the pictures and convey a loneliness rather than a malevolence. Langa's decision not to use a larger-format camera with which to take these pictures, and thus hide some of the details, abstracts them from a potentially forensic reading of the series. The choice of using a smaller digital camera – which is associated with vernacular photography – seems to be suited to the

domesticity of these spaces. Also, Langa's use of a small hand-held camera has stopped him short of adopting the very precise, linear, and in a way *uptight*, working approach which is almost instinctive when using larger-format equipment on similar such projects.

Unlike his drawings and paintings (for which he is widely acclaimed), this piece – which was included in the show *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* that was exhibited in New York last year – has been of little commercial value to Langa. Instead it has an emotional currency to the artist, who feels a need to come to terms with his position in relation to his hometown, as a native and now as an outsider.

The nine photographs, edited from a slightly larger series, are installed alongside a short video piece which is comprised of a single shot of people stepping onto a bus, set against a looped snippet of Shirley Bassey's performance of *Where Do I Begin?* The slowed-down footage accentuates every tiny shuffle of the passengers as they steadily heave themselves onto the bus. All we see is a glimpse of their feet and ankles, and a hint towards the background, although it is intended to allude to more than what it depicts. To watch this footage is quite tiring in itself and the very subdued and hypnotic soundtrack adds to this, and complements the dusty, lethargic still images in the gallery. "Where do I begin?" is obviously a rhetorical question that Langa is asking himself and is an appropriate summary of his work. The soundtrack is an unlikely juxtaposition to say the least, particularly due to the glamour associated with the singer, and the sound of the music is very nostalgic and points towards a time before Langa, but despite this it has a certain charm and adds to the quirkiness of the work.

There is an eccentricity to this project that will be problematic for some, notably the choice of format, and the somewhat kitsch soundtrack. The images are very atmospheric and give a genuine impression of the place, however, the very personal nature of this work might be too exclusive for some viewers: Despite its place here within a public gallery, and the international attention the work has already received, this work is deeply personal, and has certainly been made, first and foremost, for Langa himself. He believes there is still plenty more to study in Bakenberg and can see that the whole project (as well as coming to terms with where his homeland really is) could take a while longer to resolve.