

CONFINES OF 'A MAN'

Capturing the essence and energy of a subject

Ang Lloyd

ROBERT Hamblin's latest series of photographic work, *Threshold*, explores both the fluidity of masculinities and the confines of what it means to be "a man".

His blurry, almost painterly images of men – who are either underwear-clad or buck-naked – capture them in the jarring act of jumping, effectively "freezing" them in mid-air. This brief escape from gravity is sublime. Within a flit of a shutter, these men are no longer trapped by social and gendered constructs: for a paused millisecond, we see their souls.

Dreams to Reality is the first exhibition in the Erdmann Contemporary's new gallery space, now located in Gardens. This group show highlights a number of well-known photographers; Hamblin features alongside the likes of Niklas Zimmer, Tanisha Bhana, and Linda Tuloup. As the theme suggests, the exhibition not only deals with the binaries of the subconscious/conscious; the permanent/fleeting; and reality/imagination, but also highlights the liminal spaces between them.

Hamblin's work, which mostly deals with notions of maleness, is positioned perfectly within this mystical, undefined space. Where previously Hamblin has explored impersonal social constructs in a wider sense, now he charts more intimate artistic territories – spaces that form part of his very being. Through these images of men jumping, Hamblin's ultimate goal is to use movement to capture a humanness that is neither male nor female.

"I started off with just having an interaction with men," explains Hamblin. "It's all about movement, about interviewing them and having intimate conversations with them before I start shooting, and for them to inform the process."

Using kaolin clay to cover their bodies and faces as a type of protec-

tive "shield", Hamblin's subjects effectively "perform" for him through their own self-devised movements. The jumping aspect happened organically during these performances. "Jumping seemed to be a part of everybody's repertoire of movement," he adds.

Hamblin's work is strongly influenced by one of his mentors, abstract painter Nel Erasmus. According to him, Erasmus' art centres on "distillation" by capturing the essence and energy of a subject, as opposed to its realism and solidity.

And his *Threshold* images do just that. In one of his images, entitled *Dissident Walker*, a man is in mid-air, his feet fixedly floating above the ground. There are no details: somehow we know it is the body of a man, but his face, limbs and genitals are blurred thanks to the jump. In this state of gravitational limbo and flux, he seems open and vulnerable. But depicting vulnerability wasn't Hamblin's original intention – it was more of a beautiful accident.

"I didn't start seeing it until people mentioned it, but a lot of people have said that everybody looks vulnerable. That's interesting because (the subjects) will say to you that it required a massive amount of energy and (they had to use) their power, because jumping is a very powerful thing; it gets your heart racing. It starts becoming violent and they enjoyed that. (It's) the incredible irony of the images."

"Yet, when they're in mid-flight they seem vulnerable and exposed. I like how the images are layered that way."

Hamblin has, what he terms, a "compassionate" understanding of male violence; how a man's potential for violence causes self-loathing, and how it often underpins a man's very existence. "What I can say, based on my own experience, is that men are incredibly violent with one another. We often juxtapose privileged male violence



JUMP: Robert Hamblin's subjects 'perform' through their own self-devised movements. From left to right, *Shroud*, *Dissident Strider* and *Threshold*.



My coming into maleness at a late stage in life probably brought compassion to me that I didn't have before. It's a compassion men don't have for themselves, or one another

with women and queerness ... We use those polarities. But we need to look at the stats: the truth is that (heterosexual) men kill more men than anyone else." According to Hamblin, this "innate" violence is partly due to society's constructs and expectations – not only due to a man's biology.

Hamblin's work also has a unique perspective on the fluidity,

and complexity, of masculinities. That's because he used to be female.

"My coming into maleness at a late stage in life probably brought compassion to me that I didn't have before. It's a compassion that men don't have for themselves, or one another (...) when a man is alone, on his own, confronted with the way society sees him; he most often does not have compassion for his

struggles. I think I can probably land at that point of compassion because I understand ... I came into my body late into my life. I understand the biological violence of masculinity."

However, despite changing from female to male seven years ago, he does not see himself as transgender.

"I don't identify as a transgendered person; it's an interesting aspect of my past. What weighs more heavily with people is my journalistic past, which gives me an ability to interview people, my experience in theatre which allows me to see people's lives as narratives and to encourage people to do performances, and also my experience in the NGO world, which allows me to be respectful of people's experiences and stories to be told from their own perspective, and to let them have agency. This for me is very important in my work."

According to Hamblin, the intimacy of connection to his male subjects is paramount; when they are photographed by him, it is "confes-

sional" in nature, and only once they feel safe enough to be in a space of trust and collaboration, are no holds barred. His subjects have complete agency over the images, and if someone is uncomfortable with any aspect of the finished artwork, it will never be published.

Hamblin's work, along with enabling close male bonding, also depicts something more ethereal: it captures a space that lies between the performance and the jumping – in this space is the true self, the soul. "I see art as the spiritual," he says. "I'm an atheist but I do believe in a concept of 'spiritual-ness' – not spirituality. And the spirit of people is just something we experience."

It is this "spirit" and distilled essence of humanness that Hamblin is able to so expertly and gently capture in his images. And it's impossible to not have a spiritual experience while looking at them.

● *Dreams to Reality* runs at the Erdmann Contemporary, 84 Kloof Street, Gardens, until August 29. Call 021 422 2762.

what's on

Blues and classics

A programme change will see bassist Graham Strickland joining Albert Combrink and Louise Howlett for highlights from *Lady Sings the Blues* at the Church on Greenmarket Square today from 8.45pm to 9.45pm. The programme of songs from the era of Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan will be preceded by a classical session at 7.30pm with guest cellist Rosamund Eliza van der Westhuizen. Tickets are R60 a session or R100 for both. Call 084 682 1337.

Hardcore 'Winterfest'

Metal4Africa's Winterfest 2014 will be held at Klein Libertas Theatre in Stellenbosch on Saturday from 4pm. The event will feature eight bands from various sub-genres. Terminatrix will be joined on stage by A Price on The King's Head, Animus Fall, Peasant, Messiah Complex, Ing, Strident, and Gauteng outfit Maximum Carnage. R70. See www.metal4africa.com for info.

Swing and bebop

The John Russell Quartet will perform at Straight No Chaser in Buitenkant Street on Thursday from 8.30pm to 10pm. The quartet features Russell on guitar, Makeson Browne on piano, Charles Lazar on double bass and Jonno Sweetman on drums, playing swing and Latin jazz standards and bebop. R60 a show, or R100 for both. Call 076 679 2697.

'Jump Jive and Shout'

Kenny Lind and Playback, Generations and Herby Lewis and Slow Brew'd will perform at *The Jump Jive and Shout* classic rock and blues show at Edgemoor Bowling Club next Sunday from 3pm to 7pm. Tickets are R40 at the door. Call 061 490 1694.

'Vittorio's Secret'

Vittorio Leonardi will stage his one-man show *Vittorio's Secret* at Alexander Bar Theatre in Strand Street from August 14 to 16. The show takes a hilarious and frank look at relationships. Tickets are R80 pre-booked, or R90 at the door. See shows.alexanderbar.co.za to book.

'Groet die Grotman'

Hannes Muller will perform in *Groet die Grotman* at Die Boer Theatre in Durbanville on August 16 at 8.30pm and August 17 at 1.30pm. The play has been translated into Afrikaans by Koos Kombuis. Sandra Prinsloo directs. Call 021 979 1911.

Russian romance

Cellist Anzél Gerber and pianist Ben Schoeman will perform at the Ender Hall in Stellenbosch on August 16 at 8pm. The programme of Russian romantic music will include Arthur Rubinstein's seldom heard first sonata for cello and piano. They will also perform Stravinsky's *Suite Italienne* and Rachmaninov's *Sonata for Cello and Piano*. Tickets are R110, or R80 for students and pensioners. Call Computicket at 0861 915 8000.