

SUE PAM-GRANT



Ballet Girl, 2007, Assemblage

Height: 80cm

REDISCOVERY - BODY OF EVIDENCE 2007
06.06.07 - 23.06.07

NONTSIKELELO 'LOLO' VELEKO
Editions for Artfrab presents two striking photographs from Nontsikelelo "Lolo" Veleko's signature 'Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder' series of bold, funky street fashion portraits captured on the streets of Johannesburg.

Nontsikelelo "Lolo" Veleko, Kapi in Bree Street, 2006, Archival print

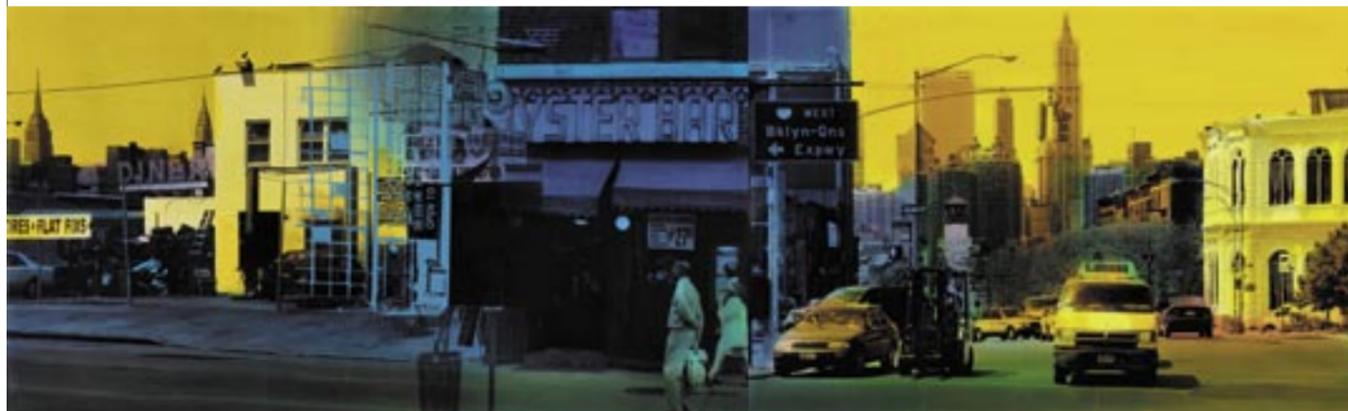
Nontsikelelo "Lolo" Veleko, Nana, 2006, Archival print

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HELLE JETZIG
"Works 2004 - 2007"
21 FEBRUARY - 8 APRIL 2007

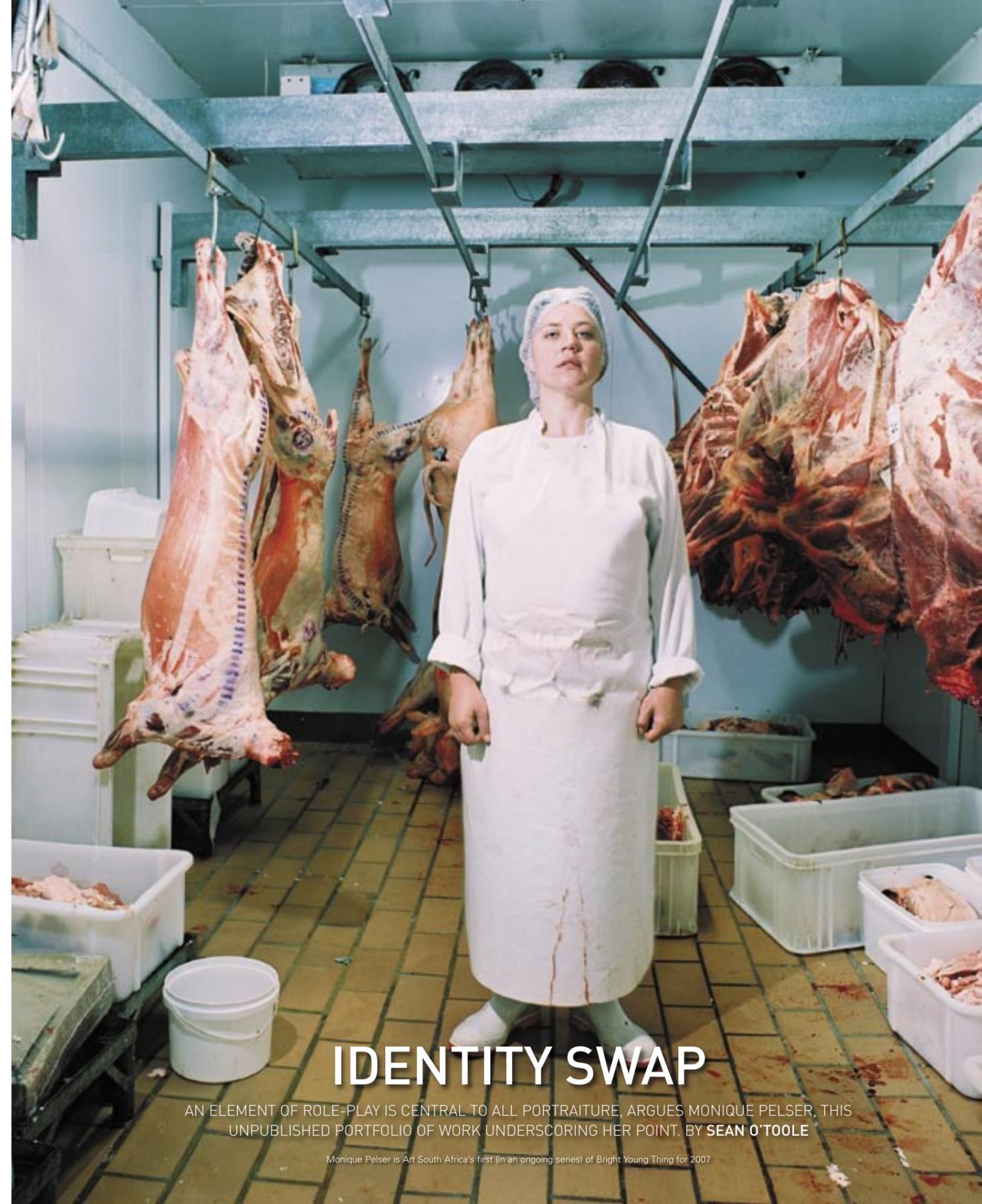


Helle Jetzig, Oyster Bar A1, Diptych, Mixed media; painting and silkscreen on b/w photograph, 2006, 100 x 330 x 5cm, Signed verso

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IDENTITY SWAP

AN ELEMENT OF ROLE-PLAY IS CENTRAL TO ALL PORTRAITURE, ARGUES MONIQUE PELSER, THIS UNPUBLISHED PORTFOLIO OF WORK UNDERSCORING HER POINT. BY SEAN O'TOOLE

Monique Pelsler is Art South Africa's first (in an ongoing series) of Bright Young Thing for 2007



On one level, her photographs are easily explained. In the manner of the German photographer August Sander, Monique Pelser, a Rhodes University MFA graduate, sought out and photographed a range of South African vocational archetypes: the builder, the mechanic, the petrol attendant, the nurse, the airline steward, the bored suburban security guard. Pelser however complicated her unceremonious portraits of the mundane by inserting herself into every frame, inhabiting – quite literally – the dress (clothes, shoes, jewellery, spectacles) of her subjects, who in turn wore her clothes and took her picture.

“Engaging in a process of role-reversal and dress-up self-portraiture, I attempted to imitate various roles and stereotypes in order to challenge the signs of identity construction through photography,” she explains. Her intention was also to invert the usual power relations involved in portraiture, in particular the photographer’s traditionally dominant role over the subject.

“I made no use of make-up (unless the person was wearing some and allowed me to use theirs) or wigs, and I did not move or set up any props,” she adds; “all I did was literally place myself in their role and into their environment.”

Prior to brokering these temporary identity exchanges, Pelser would engage her subjects in brief interviews, recording names, job titles, also discovering details about their work environment and idiosyncrasies particular to their jobs. Often this process included tours of job sites, which ranged from a working farm to a television studio and morgue. Subsequently incorporated into her MFA exhibition (entitled *Roles*) as a sound installation, these recordings assign gender roles to her photographic subjects – a fact sometimes masked by the photographer’s own gendered presence.

Throughout her interviews, Pelser says she paid close attention to the nuances that defined her subjects. “The best way to initially get to grips with the body language and gestures of the person was to ask him/her to pose for me and to take a photograph,” she says. “It was fascinating to note the things people do both consciously and unconsciously when faced with a camera. For example, some people immediately clasp their hands in front of their bodies in a closed gesture, while others open their arms. One of my favourite moments was with a man, a refuse collector, who stood in front of the pick-up truck with wide-open arms and his hands stretched out like a dancer. It was obvious that this was a self-conscious gesture, which expressed the stress and shyness of being in the spotlight while his

“ALL I DID WAS LITERALLY PLACE MYSELF IN THEIR ROLE AND INTO THEIR ENVIRONMENT”

colleagues were standing around curiously commenting.”

Of equal significance to her playful, if intentionally deadpan portraiture is Pelser’s choice of locations.

“While I intended to have little or no reference to the controlled environment of the studio, I was in fact invading and disrupting the environments with my assistant, a medium-format camera, tripod, portable flashes, and, lastly, myself. The process was very controlled and the subject-photographer only had to look through the viewfinder to check the composition, ask me to pose differently and press the shutter.”

Informed by a number of opposing portrait traditions, including the “dress-up masquerade” of South Korea-born New York-based Nikki S. Lee, as well as genre precursors Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura, it was however August Sander’s mesmerising panoply of human types that most inspired her.

“Sander’s *Pastry Cook* (1928), a full-length figure centred in his environment, dressed in a chef’s coat and engaging directly with the camera, is a major aesthetic influence on my own work,” concedes Pelser. While she admits to certain affinities with Pieter Hugo’s portraiture, a more logical reference point, locally, would be Tracey Rose’s 2002 *Ciao Bella* portraits – what distinguishes them is the latter’s focus on metaphorical archetypes rather than verifiable types.

The concept of “role-play” is helpful in suggesting the bridge linking all these contradictory reference points. “[T]here is a degree of theatricality in nearly all portrait photography,” writes Pelser in her unpublished MFA thesis. This document, from which all the quotes reprinted here are drawn, usefully articulates the many big ideas informing her *Roles* project: “the tenuous character of identity”, “the already carnivalesque character of looking”, “the instability and hybridity associated with masquerade”, and so on.

Pelser is however most concise (and honest) when she admits defeat: “What I have shown in *Roles* is that the interrogation of identity ends up manufacturing more roles, masks and skins – more surfaces within which one may lose any stable image of ‘self’.”

About Monique Pelser: Born in Johannesburg (1976), Pelser completed a course at the Market Photo Workshop, in 1996, before embarking on her fine art studies at Rhodes University. Working across a range of lens-based media, including photography, video and stop-frame animation, she was a finalist on the 2004 Brett Kebble Art Awards and has participated on select group shows in Johannesburg (at Gordart Gallery) and Grahamstown. Her MFA exhibition *Roles* (2006) was presented at the Alumni Gallery in Grahamstown. She is a lecturer in photography at Rhodes University.

previous page
Butcher, 2006, hand-colour print on Fujicrystal Archive paper, 50 x 60cm
opposite clockwise from top left
Farmer, Newspaper Hopperfeeder, Deckhand, Absa Hostess, all 2006, all hand-colour prints on Fujicrystal Archive paper, 50 x 60cm
left - right
Mechanic, Librarian, Security Guard, Head Nurse, all 2006, all hand-colour prints on Fujicrystal Archive paper, 50 x 60cm

ON THE NIGHTSHIFT

IT TOOK PHOTOGRAPHER SABELO MLANGENI MONTHS OF DOGGED PERSISTENCE TO MAKE THIS SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS OF JOHANNESBURG'S WOMEN STREET CLEANERS. BRONWYN LAW-VILJOEN CONSIDERS THEIR IMPORT

Sabelo Mlangeni is Art South Africa's second Bright Young Thing for 2007



THE STRENGTH OF THIS BODY OF WORK LIES IN MLANGENI'S ABILITY TO ALLUDE TO, BUT THEN TO DISPENSE QUICKLY WITH, NOTIONS OF HEROISM



I am certain that one can measure the social, political and economic stability of a modern city by the expediency with which it disposes of the garbage that its inhabitants accumulate. Trash left in the streets of a city marks the presence of human beings, of trade, traffic and bustling life. But uncollected, it is the first sign of social chaos, signalling a failure to solve urban problems like overcrowding, poverty, unemployment, illegal immigration and crime. It reminds us that we are but several garbage trucks away from a maelstrom.

Which is why a late-night journey into the centre of Johannesburg imparts a vague sense of unease that remains long after the fear of being hijacked has passed. Like many African cities, Johannesburg is a city of hawkers and hustlers. They crowd the sidewalks during the day but, along with the foot traffic, are gone by nightfall, leaving the detritus of informal trade and consumption. But the word detritus fails to describe the mountains of garbage that one encounters on late-night forays into downtown Jo'burg. On a recent trip, a few wrong turns meant that I traversed several one-way streets from end to end before I found my destination. A brisk wind swept through the streets so that paper and plastic accumulated in drifts or swirled about in a blizzard of waste.

It is grimly poetic that the gatekeepers of this world of decay and disorder are women who, in a truly healthy state, would be home minding children and grandchildren. Instead they are, as a raw but compelling body of photographs by Sabelo Mlangeni documents, 'on the brooms' in the small hours of the morning, sweeping and bagging the swirling piles of garbage. Mlangeni captures the surreal quality of Johannesburg's late-night, littered streets and the overwhelming reality of the work facing this band of women hired by the city to keep its thoroughfares clean. Armed with brooms and spikes, and wrapped in protective plastic, they seem to merge with the very trash that they are trying to clean up.

Mlangeni's photography – 35mm black and white – is faithful to the unwritten tenets of documentary. He is close to the action without seeming to intrude. He has the eye of the voyeur but his photographs show none of the moral ambivalence of voyeurism's stolen images. Instead, his shots – many of them have the hasty feel of a moment caught just in time and often from a distance – suggest not only the perils of being a female street sweeper in a dangerous city but also the risks faced by someone with a camera working late at night in the same city. So while Mlangeni keeps his distance from his subjects he is, for the duration of his project, facing the same risks as they are.

What Mlangeni lacks, for now, in technical prowess, he makes up for in faithfulness to the task he has set himself: to convey the harshness of the work that these women do. The strength of this body of work lies in Mlangeni's ability to allude to, but then to dispense quickly with, notions of heroism. These pictures are not about the heroic but about expediency and survival. His subjects are, after all, ordinary, middle-aged women who are forced to take their lunch breaks at three in the morning on the sidewalks of one of the most dangerous cities in the world.

Bronwyn Law-Viljoen is a Johannesburg-based critic and managing editor with David Krut Publishing

About Sabelo Mlangeni: Born (1980) in Driefontein, near Piet Retief, Mlangeni moved to Johannesburg in 2001, initially studying photography via correspondence before enrolling at the Market Photo Workshop (MPW). A participant in the exhibition *Johannesburg Circa Now* (2005), curated by Terry Kurgan and Jo Ractliffe (his MPW mentor), Mlangeni was last year awarded the Edward Ruiz Mentorship, an award offering young photographers an opportunity to develop a substantial body of social documentary work. *Invisible Woman*, exhibited at the MPW late in 2006, was the result. Currently working as a freelance photographer, Mlangeni is due to hold his first commercial exhibition at Warren Siebrits Modern and Contemporary Art later in 2007.

facing page
Untitled, from *The Invisible Women* series, 2006, inkjet print on archival paper

left - right
Both photographs
Untitled, from *The Invisible Women* series, 2006, inkjet print on archival paper