

Rendering the darkness



FROZEN IN TIME: Marc Shoul captures the soul of Brakpan, the unglamorous East Rand mining town, in this series of photographs that won first prize last year in the Italian-based Winephoto competition. Main picture, Down Town Sports Bar, Elliot Road, 2008; left, Waterval Avenue, Flamingo Ridge, 2009; right, The Jesus Festival in Voortrekker Road, 2009; Nicoleme's Hen Party, Minnabrom, 2010



Joburg photographer Marc Shoul has won a prestigious international award for his series on Brakpan. He chats to *Oliver Roberts* about his attraction to the town and the morbid fascination photographers have with discomfiting themes

A WOODEN cross carried in a procession and lit by the sun, two boys painting themselves blue before a Blue Bulls rugby game, a strange mannequin in a front garden, and a family walking past the Down Town Sports Bar, everything shrouded in fog.

These are four of the 12 moody and enigmatic photographs of Brakpan that won Johannesburg photographer Marc Shoul last year's Winephoto award.

The award, named after its origins as a wine photography competition, has, over the past eight years, evolved to include broader themes and become prestigious enough to have the likes of two Magnum photographers and a former director of National Geographic on its jury.

This year's competition, with the theme "Renaissance", received 512 entries from 54 countries.

Shoul's series on the old mining town on the East Rand, masterfully captured with his Hasselblad 500C/M, is a documentation of the gradual decline of the town, its backwardness, and the people who inhabit it.

"I drove around the West Rand and the East and South and North, and went back to Brakpan and thought there was something amazing about the town, because it's like it's been dropped into formaldehyde," says Shoul of his decision to portray Brakpan.

"There's hardly any development in the town, and what's caused it to remain as though it's in the 1950s or 1960s is that their mines were depleted of gold and uranium at that time. The second wave of stunting is the result of Carnival City, Carnival Mall and the casino. The town centre has remained untouched and undeveloped."

Shoul began driving out to Brakpan three-and-a-half years ago, and worked at developing relationships with its people. The pictures, therefore, have a deep intimacy to them, an empathy that borders on profound sadness.

"Really? They made you sad?" Shoul asks when I tell him this. "But the people aren't sad. I don't always look for sadness because pictures in Africa are usually this stereotype of poor, sad people. And, actually, within that there's happiness and there's opportunities, to an extent. But it's easier to look at the sadness."

“My work isn't a mouthpiece for anybody; it's a reflection of me”

Brakpan is still a work in progress for Shoul. He would like, one day, to compile the images in a book. And while he may not consider them sad, he acknowledges that some make you feel edgy.

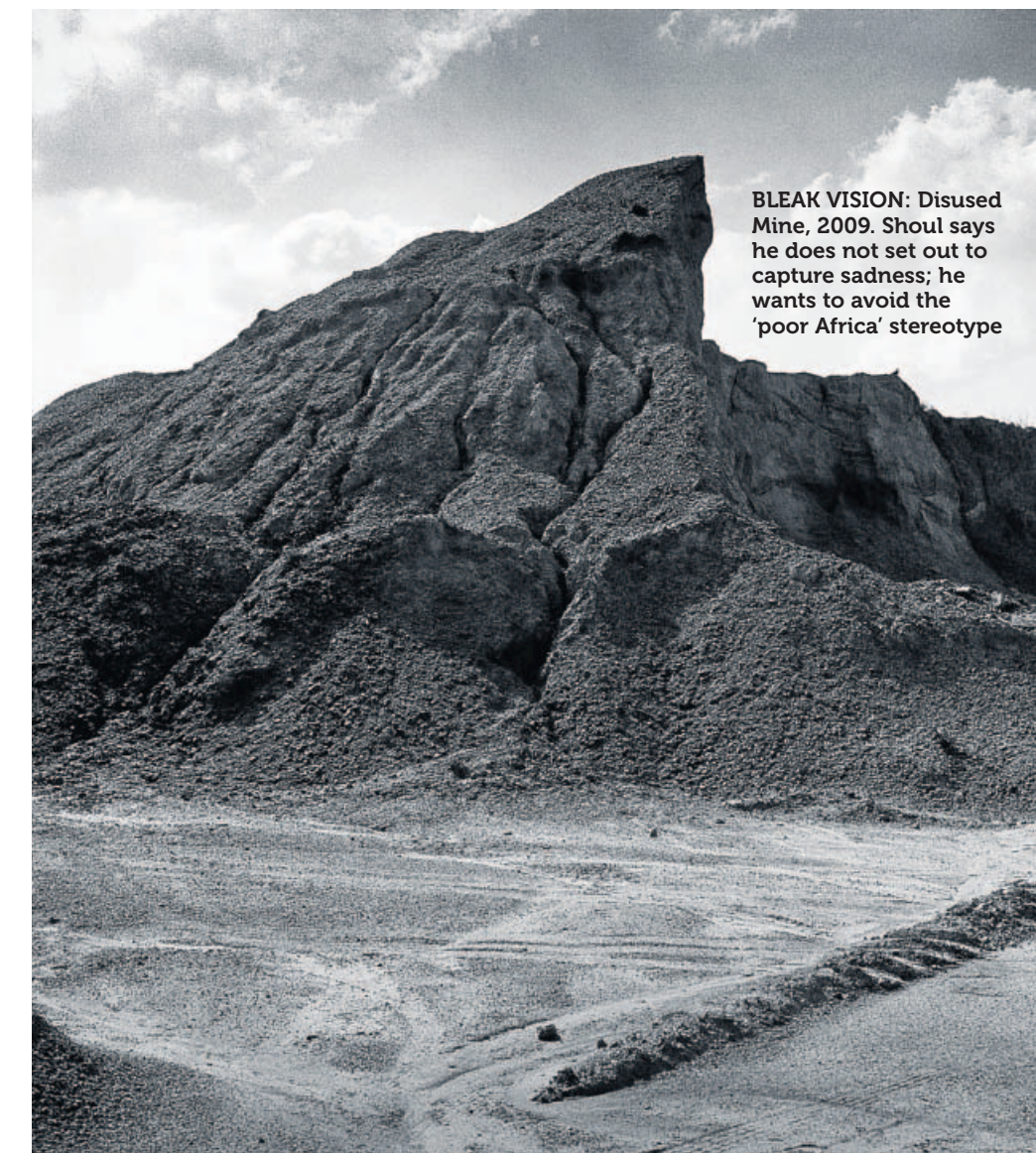
"Documentary photographers have a macabre fascination with being in areas that are uncomfortable, which is important. You find that there are universal norms everywhere. We drink tea the same way, but we might not put the same sh*t in the tea. It's those things, and people's freedoms, that I'm interested in."

Shoul's work is heavily influenced by David Goldblatt. What's interesting is that Shoul's Brakpan images could easily be photographs taken by Goldblatt in the 1960s, so stagnant is the place.

Shoul, though, is uninterested in trying to be a moral, pictorial representative for the people he photographs. "While I was studying, I was presumptuous enough to think that my work could be a mouthpiece for poor whites in this country. But that's bullsh*t," he says.

"My work is not a mouthpiece for anybody; it's a reflection of me within these people and within this place. So if I'm taking advantage of them, I'm taking advantage of myself."

● Shoul's winning series can be viewed at www.winephoto.it



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