Photography

Back to the future: Clockwise from top left: Hanson and Derrick, Geores Boxing Club, Hillbrow, 2005; Brenda, The Mexican Sports Bar, Hillbrow, 2006; Seko sleeps among gifts and supplies on route to Malawi, Wineloop Flats, Johannesburg Central, 2006; Delight, Christmas Day, Benjamin Court, Yeoville, 2004; and Laurence and Kobus, actors on the set of *We Were Black*, Marshalltown, 2006

The flat of the land

Photographer Marc Shoul's black-and-white *Flatlands* finds moments of poignant silence in the hustle and bustle of the Johannesburg CBD

A few weeks after his exhibition, *Flatlands*, opened in Cape Town last year, photographer Marc Shoul received a handwritten letter. The note, its sentences rendered in a disciplined cursive, congratulated the Port Elizabeth-born photographer on his black-and-white studies of contemporary Johannesburg and offered him encouragement for the future.

"Who is this Peter Clarke guy?" asked Shoul when he showed me the letter.

"He's an important artist," I responded, thinking of the 81-year-old Ocean View resident's extraordinary flame-coloured painting in the collection of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, currently on view at Cape Town's National Gallery. "You should send him a photo as thanks."

Shoul did, Clarke reciprocating with a small lino print. Creativity, once thrust into public view, has a strange, indeterminate life. It is hard to know the audiences it will reach or the outcomes it will provoke and also the extent of the terrible silences it will encounter.

For the most part, Shoul's wandering essay on public life in Johannesburg's inner city, the outcome of five years of labour, was a failure. His 40cm x 40cm photographs found few buyers, received almost no reviews and prompted contemporary art dealers locally — those imagined conduits to global fame — to wrinkle their noses at his traditional approach to the documentary idiom.

Which makes me wonder: What did Clarke see that most of us missed? I'd venture a single word: silence. It is the operative register of photography and, with stillness, defines the draw of a medium.

Shoul's essay includes a number of photos of a stilled noise: that whirring fan inside a clinical New Doorfontein eatery; the hectoring bass we imagine enveloping Brenda, an exotic dancer contorted on a Hillbrow dancefloor; the exclamatory rush of water we hear coming out of Norma's hosepipe as she waters her curbside garden in Bellevue East.

Addresses are crucial to deciphering Shoul's essay. An early photograph from 2004 shows a pedestrian, illuminated by a parentheses of urban light, walking up Nugget Street in Hillbrow. From this geographical centre his essay follows logical desire lines — shorthand for walking paths determined by animal and human instinct — wandering west to Braamfontein, east to Yeoville and south to Selby. Old Johannesburg.

Early on, frustrated by his project's lack of coherence, Shoul travelled southeast to photographer Jo Ractliffe's home in Bez Valley. Her insight, advice and stern forthrightness helped Shoul's essay move beyond its preoccupation with one-shot brilliance and find a defining logic.

"It is no good just being able to make singular, compelling pictures," Ractliffe summarised her advice to Shoul. "You must be able to answer the question: 'What is my project?'"

To help him see his project in words, Ractliffe offered Shoul a reading list. Seated in the photographer's Killarney flat one afternoon, he showed me one of the prescribed books, a reader containing excerpts of texts by Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag.

"Sheesh bru," he sighed, "I don't understand what a lot of these people are saying."

"There are a number of artists who, though not pioneers or innovators, have the virtue of summing up many of the qualities of those who are"

Paging through the book, I paused on Martha Rosler's classic leftist critique of the liberal documentary tradition.

"Documentary photography has been much more comfortable in the company of moralism than wedded to a rhetoric or programme of revolutionary politics," argued Rosler, a pioneering conceptual artist and art theorist. "Documentary is a little like horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy, into imagery. One can handle imagery by leaving it behind."

Rosler's trenchant essay, which can be read as a response to photographer Allan Sekula's 1978 call for "a political critique of the documentary genre", is markedly of its time. A year after its publication in 1981, local liberals and lefties disagreed over much the same issues at the Culture and Resistance conference in Botswana.

Taxi Accident, corner Rissik and Wolmarans streets, Braamfontein, 2007

Full circle in the city centre

Marc Shoul gives **Lauren Clifford-Holmes** the lowdown on the creative process behind *Flatlands* and what he wants people to take from it

What did the *Flatlands* project set out to achieve?
People often think it is a political piece, but it's far from that. It is rather a documentary of space and time within the Jo'burg CBD. I see inner-city Jo'burg as a microcosmic version of what South Africa is right now, encapsulating the transition the country is going through, as well as projecting what it could become. Also, I was tired of hearing how dangerous this city is, how white people haven't been there in the past 10 or 15 years. My thinking was that where there's bad, there's got to be equal amounts of good, if not more. I went out to find that.

How did you approach the work? Merely as an observer?
Well, my work is largely based on social issues. I wanted to find out what sort of lifestyle these people are living, I wanted to see how this melting pot of cultures lives in this highly dense area. I found so many different stories, from kids bunking school and going to the movies to labourers sleeping in cinemas at night because they had missed the last bus and had a warm place to sleep after paying just R15 or R20 to see a movie. I witnessed this beautiful cross-section and melting pot of culture and people and energy, which is just so contagious. Our country changes on a daily basis, an hourly basis, even. To see the contrasts and shifts reflected in these blocks of flats was striking. It was that energy I was looking for. I was looking for love, looking for how people are getting on with their lives, how they come to South Africa and Jo'burg, as I did, looking for their pile of gold. When you really start digging, though, you discover that there's a lot more to the city than just that job-related drive and purpose.

Did you find harmony among all these different cultures and nations living side by side?
In reality there will be issues in any situation where you have a lot of different families living in one flat, where the only room partition is often a piece of plastic or a blanket. People don't have that privacy that many would believe is one's common right. Living in very small spaces, there's bound to be arguments and things going missing, because doors are open. Kids are in and out of flats and I think that a lot of our population may not realise that behind the facades of the electric fences and barbed-wire fences, there are communities that are existing in there and trying to make a life for themselves. But different cultures do seem to come together — you've got Congolese, Zimbabweans, the whole lot, it's just fantastic. I see the CBD as an example of the type of country South Africa could become.

So having experienced the inner city over the years shooting this project, is it the South Africa you'd like us to become?
Yes and no. I'd like to live in Johannesburg with less fear, although that is part of the momentum of Jo'burg. Town is fantastic; I just wish it was more accessible to those who fear it from the outside. The sense of community, the strong visible cultures, the way there [is everything from] bars to churches that are open all hours is brilliant. There is a life there, there is a pulse that exists in the CBD that doesn't exist in the suburbs. It's completely divorced from the suburbs. I mean I live in Killarney, which is only a kilometre and a half from Hillbrow, but the temperature there is completely different.

Are there any specific images or stories that stood out for you?
The *Mexican Sports Bar* is one such series. It documents this brothel and strip club, a sort of haven for the underworld. I got permission from the manager to shoot an evening there. Before the evening kicked off he got on to stage to tell everyone that he knew this *mlungu*, this white man, taking photos and that if I misrepresented them, they'd kill me. It's all tongue-in-cheek and I'm not going to misrepresent him because that's not what I'm about. One of the strongest photos of the series is of Brenda dancing on the dirty floor. Another one is Gladys dancing next to a barrier with a patron's hand coming out of nowhere, the darkness, groping her. It was a very sad place. The girls are young. It's a means to an end for a lot of them. They are underneath somebody's thumb. It's very sad circumstances that they're in.

So how do you reconcile those sad, dark stories, with still quite a positive sense of what you experienced and witnessed overall?
It is important to show both sides of the coin — the sad and the happy, the good and the bad. For instance, another essential image of the series is the SAB fountain swimmers, which depicts three naked children swimming in the museum of beer's fountain, which belongs to the breweries in Newtown, on a Sunday morning. The mere fact that they are naked and swimming carefree in a corporate fountain just shows how people in the inner city have adapted the surroundings to their needs and wants and lifestyles. I think that image is a true reflection of the current state of town, showing how this space has become the people's. Another interesting image is of two cops on a film set. And a lot of people who haven't read the byline think it was shot in the 1960s. But really it shows the circle that South Africa has made. Now you have white guys acting as cops in old uniforms on TV series. So the circle keeps rolling and the contrast within this area is a true reflection of where South Africa is.

What would you like people to take from this series?
I would really like people to experience and witness this as a documentary of a specific time and place. I want people to be able to see that this area is actually functional in its own dysfunctional way, that there is a light side of life within this area and it's not all dark and gloomy. I believe the vibrancy and energy of the area is something that should be experienced by everybody in our country.

● For a slideshow of *Flatlands* images and audio from the interview with Shoul go to **www.mg.co.za/flatlands**

www.mg.co.za

, writes **Sean O'Toole**

In the event the liberals won. Although the labour-rights photographer William Matlala lingers in obscurity, liberal documentarians prosper. Indeed, the liberal documentary tradition is now entrenched as the prevailing mode of imaging South Africa photographically — to the extent that its grammar has been entirely naturalised by young practitioners.

So why didn't Shoul make a bigger splash with his exhibition last year? Why has it taken a well-received showing in Switzerland recently to make us sit up and notice his work?

One possible answer — and run a bit with me here — is suggested in Geoff Dyer's peripatetic 2005 book, *The Ongoing Moment*. A sleuthing read that promotes deep looking at singular photos, Dyer makes a convincing argument for the way photographers often shoot the same subjects — hats, for example, or blind people and beds.

The same process happens on a micro-scale in Shoul's *Flatlands* essay. There is a logical affinity, for instance, between his portrait of a white adolescent car guard in Braamfontein, photographed in 2004, and David Goldblatt's 1973 straight-up portrait of a Hillbrow "newsboy". Ditto the rooftop sleepers he and Guy Tillim photographed almost simultaneously, a few blocks apart, in 2004.

These correspondences unavoidably cue the dilemma of novelty in the art world. But it needn't be viewed as a dilemma. As Dyer writes: "There are a number of artists who, though not pioneers or innovators, have the virtue of summing up many of the qualities of those who are." This is Shoul's strength, one that is deserving of handwritten letters of praise.