



MEDITATIONS IN BLACK AND WHITE

Fresh insights arrive as a renowned photographer revisits his archive of work, writes Tymon Smith

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You can still see some of the elements of photographer Guy Tillim's recent exhibition *Hotel Universo* at the Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, but the best way to experience it in the Covid-19 moment is through the gallery's online viewing room. There, in the company of short audio commentaries by the artist, you can virtually page through the three books of black and white images created for the show.

The books present works from Tillim's extensive archive in new juxtapositions that throw up questions about the possibilities of conveying feeling through photographs and express the personal emotions of the photographer towards his subjects.

The first book – *Hotel Universo*, from which the exhibition takes its name – comprises images taken in Mozambique, Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo between 2003 and 2007. It focuses on buildings and monuments in an attempt to convey Tillim's fascination with "the feeling of being utterly lost... so different was this environment from the one I grew up in".

With their still contemplation of the decay and forgotten dreams of post-colonial rule, the images bring to mind easy negative judgments on Africa's failures. But these are not what Tillim hopes viewers will take away from them. Rather, he says he was concerned that his depiction of decay was a simple visual metaphor for an African political condition of a certain era. "I wanted to avoid that because my attraction to the buildings was different: human hope and expectation in the colonial experiment and its overthrow, and the pathos of failed or inappropriate expectations. And, more personally, an imagined future, being young in a place that was becoming something new."

While stuck at home due to Covid restrictions in the

small Karoo town where he lives these days, Tillim busied himself selecting and printing the images for the exhibition. He found that when he printed some of the images in black and white he became infatuated. "Apart from the deep and pleasing tones, in black and white [the images] seemed to become less about narrative and place and more about form and a still moment in the anonymous stream of history. I lost myself in the images." It was a natural progression for Tillim to decide to present his new work completely in black and white.

The second series of images is titled *Second Nature*. It consists of photographs taken during a journey Tillim made in 2010 after purchasing a boat and sailing it from Miami to French Polynesia in the footsteps of British explorer Captain James Cook. Tillim recalls: "I came across the diaries of Captain Cook during his voyages in the South Pacific. There was a discussion with painters and scientists on board about how to convey the sense of the places they were seeing, commissioned as they were by a society and public that had never imagined such a landscape."

These questions have never ceased to be relevant to him. "Should you impose on an image of a place something of what it makes you feel, or should you let the place speak

through you, where you are a neutral vessel? If it's the latter, which in my view is desirable, the obvious question arises: who are you? Not a bad line of inquiry in this day and age, or any age. I thought I'd start there. I haven't come to any resolution, of course."

Dar es Salaam and Abidjan, the third photobook, represents a continuation of Tillim's recent interest in capturing the lives of ordinary people populating the streets of present-day African cities but also signifies a departure in approach through the use of hidden artifice – combining different scenes to create a new, manipulated view that Tillim hopes will convey "the effortless grace" of particularly ordinary moments. The creation of these images by means of digital technology provides a means to "indulge every photographer's one-time fantasy: combining preferred aspects of different images in one frame. But I was also interested in the process of imagining something that ultimately will, I suspect, become a process of taking away rather than adding to."

In these uncertain moments of the pandemic, Tillim's work and its presentation here create a space that allows for "the happy consummation of viewer and a picture in a book, or on a wall, as contemplation and meditation. The reasons it was made in the first place." They're also a thoughtful re-imagining of work from the archive of a photographer who's long been attempting to "find a suspended place, where the burden of the past is light and unimposing for a moment. Those moments grow longer as I get older, so it must be getting easier," says Tillim.

Parts of the 'Hotel Universo' exhibition are still available to view at Stevenson Gallery Cape Town by appointment. The entire show is available in the gallery's online viewing room. stevenson.info.