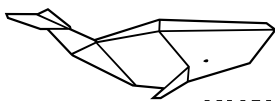


# PIETER HUGO

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

EDITED BY  
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# ON THE POWER OF THE ECCENTRIC VIEW Pieter Hugo's Post-colonial *Theatrum mundi*

RALF BEIL

“Nothing is ever the same as they said it was. It's what I've never seen before that I recognize.” Diane Arbus

Who is aware of the situation in the no-man's-land of Accra – a site more contaminated than Chernobyl? Which fictions are produced by Nollywood – after Hollywood and Bollywood, the third largest film industry in the world? How much history can be read in the eyes of the children of Rwanda – twenty years after the genocide? The sharp eye of South African photographer Pieter Hugo (b. 1976) makes us poignantly aware of parallel worlds which – barely known or quickly forgotten by the global community – are symptomatic of our time. In Pieter Hugo's series of works, the typological stringency of the portrait photography of August Sander coalesces with the eccentric photo documentation of private and psychological realities of Diane Arbus to contribute to a contemporary mosaic, bearing witness to the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous in the global whole.

Often his pictures literally get under our skin – as exemplified by the manipulated black-and-white portrait series *There's a Place in Hell for Me and My Friends*, in which melanin becomes photogenic and the pigmentation of faces is dramatically visible. By way of contrast, the occasionally hyperrealistic effect of his photo works underscores the at times sheer unbelievable contents of his post-colonial world theatre.

Instead of presenting an embellished or one-dimensional image of his home continent of Africa, he gathers representatives of various classes and occupational groups in front of his camera: wild honey collectors, film actors, judges and barristers, as well as animal tamers and electronic waste recyclers below the poverty line. Since his first photo series, *Looking Aside* from 2003, Pieter Hugo repeatedly and programmatically includes himself and family members among his often marginalized models. When possible, he uses their names as work titles, thus documenting that we are not dealing here with photogenic motifs but rather with individuals, in all their fragility and vitality.

With its intimate intertwining of art and life with a view towards politics and history, Pieter Hugo's multifaceted and highly informed oeuvre, which, in the meantime, extends far beyond the African continent to include China and California,



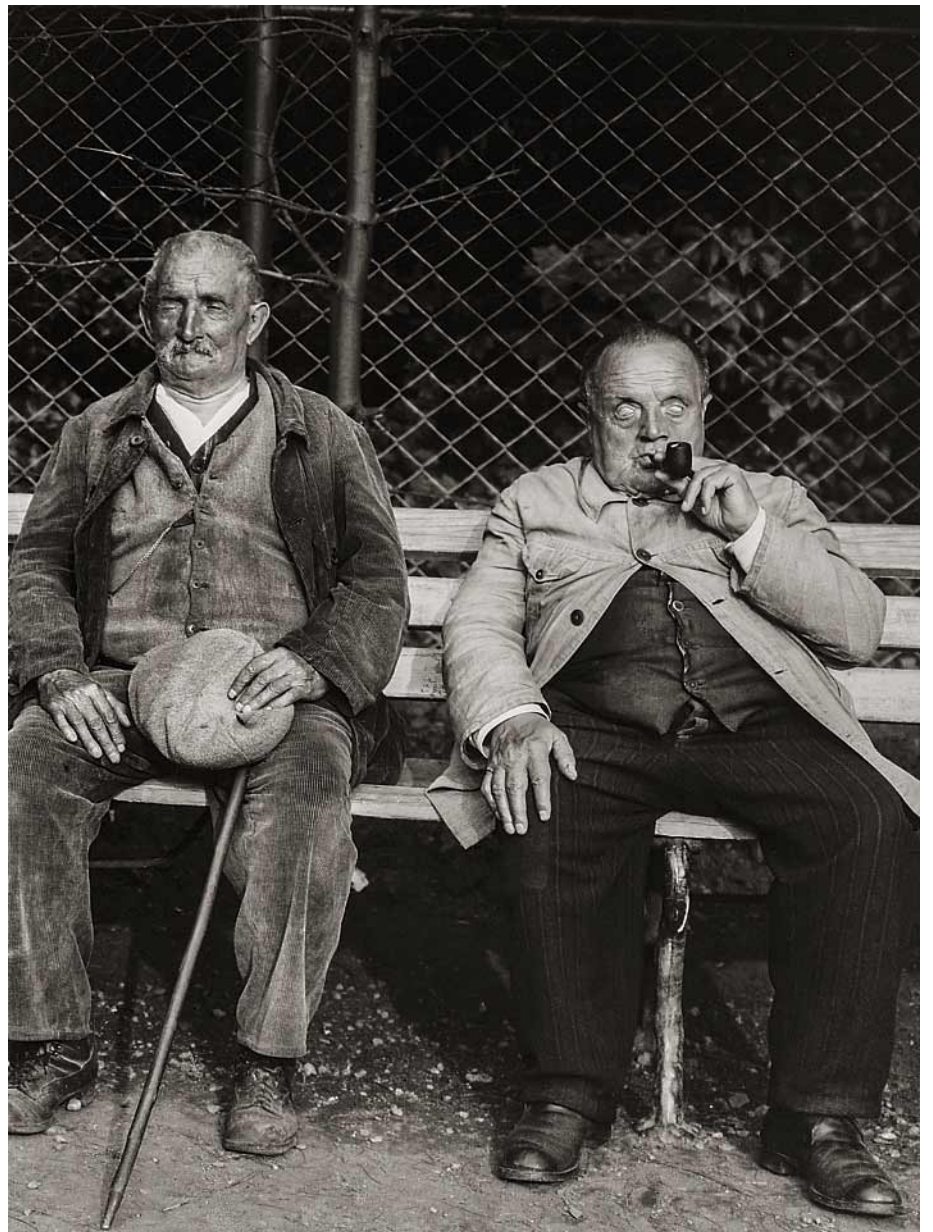
fits perfectly into the overall programme of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. Like the museum, the work of this photographer can be seen as a special kind of world receiver. Hugo invariably adopts a clear position and takes a stand, so that larger contexts become discernible. He thus describes the apocalyptic electronic waste dump of Agbogbloshie in Accra as a “dark and dirty monument to the digital age”. Whether the underprivileged white population of South Africa, homeless people in California, black judges in stately robes, or freaks and outsiders in China, he always ferrets out the upheavals and transgressions of both history and the present day manifested in mankind. His artistic credo aims at intensity: “I am interested in portraits that captivate viewers and do not let them go, which are so intriguing that they can no longer look away.”

Photographs are often a source of inspiration for the works of the artist possessing a high degree of awareness of the wounds of colonialism and apartheid. Pieter Hugo is often described as a photo artist of the post-apartheid generation. But this does not really sum it up. Conflicts have not become less, neither in South Africa nor anywhere else in the world. Nevertheless: 1994 is in fact a defining year, both personally and historically. At eighteen years of age, Pieter Hugo finishes school and leaves his parental home. That same year, the genocide in Rwanda takes places parallel with the appointment of Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected president of South Africa after decades of apartheid. Ten years later, Hugo photographs the still visible traces of the genocide. Another ten years down the line, he focuses on the children of this country.

In his “Confession” from 1927 August Sander was already aware of the amplitude and ambivalence of photography. “It can reproduce things with impressive beauty, or even with cruel accuracy, but it can also be outrageously deceptive.” With his “cultural work of photographs”, his magnum opus *People of the 20th Century*, Sander wanted more than anything else to “tell the truth about our age and its people”. Although today – one hundred years later – we are much more cautious with the use of the word “truth”, Pieter Hugo continues to pursue the same basic photographic message. And it is precisely for this that he makes use of the power of his only ostensibly eccentric view.

**2 AUGUST SANDER**  
*Showman with Performing Bear*  
in the Westerwald, 1929

**3 AUGUST SANDER**  
*Blind Miner and*  
*Blind Soldier, c.1930*











**1 SAM NZIMA** *Mbuyisa Makhubo carrying wounded Hector Pieterse followed by his sister Antoinette, Soweto, 16 June 1976*



# PIETER HUGO Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

UTA RUHKAMP

There are numerous Youth Days worldwide. In South Africa, 16 June is a holiday. This Youth Day commemorates the Soweto Uprising of 1976, when black students protested against the Bantu Education Act which introduced Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. The initially peaceful demonstration of high school and college students escalated and the police opened fire. Among the first victims was thirteen-year-old Hector Pieterse. At the very moment when Mbuyisa Makhubo carried the dying youth in his arms and tried to save him together with his sister, a now iconic photograph was taken by Sam Nzima (fig. 1). The harrowing image of a *Pietà* turned reality triggered a worldwide storm of protest. To this day, it remains the symbolic image of the attempted rebellion against the apartheid regime and is prominently displayed in front of the Hector Pieterse Museum in Soweto.

Forty years later, within the context of his 1994 series, Pieter Hugo, born in Johannesburg in 1976, portrays

two black South African brothers in a field of flowers, whose pose is reminiscent of Nzima's photo of Hector Pieterse (ill. p. 219). It is highly probable that the two youths are not aware of the historical dimension suggested by their portrait. And it is precisely this discrepancy of awareness that Pieter Hugo targets with 1994. Whereas in series such as *Rwanda 2004: Vestiges of Genocide* (2004), *Messina/Musina* (2006) and *Kin* (2006–13) he photographically captures the traces and effects of national history both experienced and survived, with 1994 he concentrates on a younger generation, on children and youths who were born during or after this historical year – that is to say, after the genocide in Rwanda and after the official end of apartheid and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela.

In an almost metaphorical manner, Hugo decontextualizes his young models by embedding them in unspoiled nature. Free of any historical baggage, as Pieter Hugo describes this,

they populate trees, float weightlessly in water, or virtually merge with stones, meadows and soil.<sup>1</sup> These are not sentimental portraits of light-hearted and laughing children, but rather, for Pieter Hugo, surprisingly aesthetically accentuated photographs of adolescent personalities with an unbiased view. As with his adult models, Hugo maintains a neutral perspective reminiscent of August Sander's *People of the 20th Century*: "I learned a great deal from August Sander: economy of means, directness and modesty."<sup>2</sup> The rich associative potential of Hugo's portrait series (fig. 2) is founded in this childlike sincerity, which is equally discernible in Sander's portraits of children. Older generations of viewers, whose perception of images is influenced by visual and emotional experiences, pose questions that do not even suggest themselves among children. A young girl thus poses on a bed of earth like Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, wearing a strangely out of place, golden sequined dress, which probably came

from a used clothing collection in Europe – a Lolita-like apparition evoking dark presumptions (ill. p. 222). Coincidence or deliberate staging? Unsuitable, torn and dirty articles of clothing not appropriate for this age group transform the children into small adults and, despite the lack of indicators for their origin, seem to allow one to draw conclusions about social backgrounds. Or are these false conclusions? Small injuries, children that appear curiously stiff and grounded and lonely, evoke images of war zones, as well as of hunger and poverty. Never to be forgotten, Kevin Carter's image from 1993 of the famished crouching young girl from the Sudan before a watchful vulture has been seared into our collective visual memory (fig. 3). Immersed in nature were also the unsealed mass graves in Rwanda, which Hugo photographed in 2004 (ill. p. 39). The experienced eye quickly understands that nature – which ostensibly exists outside of history – is not a safe and neutral place for these children either. As fairylike as many of Pieter Hugo's post-colonial post-war children may appear, they do not populate a modern Arcadia, but rather already occupy their historical legacy. The question is how they will come to terms with this "scorched earth" on which they live. With 1994, Hugo deliberately casts doubt. When asked for explanations as to the conditions under which these images were created, he holds back. It is this lack of answers, the doubt that remains, which transforms the highly aesthetic effect of these photographs into a slight sense of unease.



3 KEVIN CARTER *Famine in Sudan*, 1993

## Cultural Hybrids

At the centre of each of Pieter Hugo's individual series is man. His socio-analytic stocktaking is not to be understood as an all-encompassing panorama of a particular country in the sense of the situationally contingent images taken by David Goldblatt during the apartheid era, but rather as a portrait series, which seems almost compulsory, since it is particularly the portrait that raises questions of identity. How is identity defined in culturally divided countries in which entire societies find themselves in a state of political and socio-structural change? How do people live with the shadows of cultural repression or political dominance? The historical baggage, which Hugo ostensibly ignores in 1994, plays a decisive role here. Through his own socialization in a South Africa torn by the history of apartheid, Pieter Hugo has developed a keen instinct for social dissonances. In this sense, his gaze has been sensitized not only in his own country but also on a global level. Across the globe both developed and underdeveloped societies are changing unevenly, at times even

diametrically, and at a frenetic pace, triggered by waves of migration, progress, globalization, digitalization and political upheavals. In this context, the question as to one's own identity and the definition of homeland and family, a place of belonging – in short, a home – is highly topical.

It thus appears that much more logical that the *Kin* series, which developed over a long period of eight years, is particularly important for Pieter Hugo. The starting point was his personal environment: portraits of his family, his pregnant wife, his children, parents and grandmother, as well as self-portraits. "Kin" means clan or family and is often used as an ethnographic term in the context of investigations of kinship systems among ethnic groups. In contrast, Pieter Hugo transfers the term "kin" onto the entire South African society, including both the colonizers and the colonized. His interest is directed towards hidden and obvious contradictions, the conflict between tradition and modernity, towards features of cultural hybridity – both in his own society, as demonstrated by the *Messina/Musina* and *Kin* series, and more recently in his *Flat Noodle Soup Talk* series created in Beijing. From the first of these three

series, which is a precursor of the large-scale *Kin* project, is the portrait of *Pieter and Maryna Vermeulen with Timana Phosiwa* (ill. p. 85), which in one single picture flagrantly gets to the heart of the social fractures: a white South African couple who appear touchingly poor and modest sit together on a sofa holding a black child between them, calling to mind images of the Holy Family. Even without the additional information that Pieter Vermeulen lost his leg as a result of a work accident, that the couple are subtenants of a black family and are taking care of the child of their sick landlord, the portrait thwarts all clichés and speaks of the unpopular realities of post-colonial South Africa.

In the *Kin* series, Pieter Hugo addresses a similar theme with the portrait of *Dirk and Maryna Swanepoel, Jansenville* (ill. p. 135) who, like approximately 450,000 other white South Africans, live below the subsistence level. It is also true that the corrugated sheet metal landscape of Diepsloot (“Deep Ditch”) township and the private swimming pool worlds of the exclusive gated community of Dainfern in the north of Johannesburg are practically adjacent to each other. The wealth gap between these two neighbourhoods – with approximately 200,000 people on the one side and around 1,200 families in the sheltered “enclave” on the other side – measures a mere three kilometres (ills. pp. 140 and 141).

Contemporary South Africa knows many truths, to which *Kin* refers with portraits and still-life motifs. The “inverted” image of poor whites and rich blacks and the ever-increasing wealth gap are but two facets: a gay couple that was married in traditional dress (ill. p. 159), a tattooed parking attendant with piercing green eyes who with his jacket and tie would make for an exotic fashion model (ill. p. 2), young men who bizarrely wear

an English check pattern in the course of their initiation (ill. p. 126), and an impressive portrait of Meriam “Mary” Tlali, who worked her whole life as a maid for Pieter Hugo’s grandmother (ill. p. 142). *Kin* bears witness to a schizophrenic society, with one foot firmly rooted in the history of apartheid and countless ethnic traditions and the other on its way to a new, freer and more democratic multi-ethnic phase of national history.

Similar breaks and signs of change are reflected in *Flat Noodle Soup Talk*: a classical Chinese one-child family, a young couple in front of their own idealized wedding picture, a naked homosexual couple, a Chinese punk (ills. pp. 276, 287, 278 and 277). The Zhou family appears irritatingly free and happy in the ascetic ambience of their ideologically unfree life (ill. p. 279). A young girl in a typical dress in front of an equally typical blossoming cherry tree: a perfect cliché of China – were she not pierced (ill. p. 289).

For the portraits of families and couples in all three series Pieter Hugo situates his models in their own telling surroundings: at home. Pictures, decor and trophies in lived-in and worn-out bedrooms and living rooms give indications of social class as well as of the contemporary “mixed culture” in which the portrayed live. He utilizes his still-life motifs along with fragments of interiors and exteriors as even more condensed commentaries. Decorative deer safely basking in the sun in the hunting ground of Musina (ill. p. 95); a plate with typical African maize porridge, a chequered serving tray and a floral tablecloth in a squatted mining house of the Primrose Mines (ill. p. 128); and human figures made of plaster set aside in a corner full of junk in Beijing (ill. p. 282): each of these pictures stands as a poignant symbol of everyday cultural absurdity. Sofas covered in craquelure, peeling

wall paint and rotting fruit, function, at the same time, as *vanitas* motifs and allude to the transience, the phase of transition, the tears in the hybrid identity of the photographically analysed society (ills. pp. 143 and 152).

## Beyond the Norm

Both *Kin* and *Flat Noodle Soup Talk* clearly demonstrate that Pieter Hugo is especially interested in figures on the margins of society, the gap between the ideal and reality. “I was always into subcultures and things that were out of the norm.”<sup>3</sup> With this predilection and an objective visual language, Hugo oscillates between the photographic legacies of Diane Arbus and August Sander. Approximately fifty years lie between the photographs of Arbus and Hugo, which makes the social constants of marginalization demonstrated by their direct comparison all the more astonishing (ills. pp. 253 and 265). “Freaks”, Arbus writes, “were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats.”<sup>4</sup> It is in this sense that Hugo lets Californian wildflowers blossom where people on the street – morally driven into a corner – look away. For his *Californian Wildflowers* series (2014) he portrayed destitute and homeless people in Los Angeles and San Francisco who live in their own world, including war veterans, those suffering from addiction and mental issues, as well as transgender and transsexual individuals.

It is clearly discernible that these portraits, unlike those created with his usual working methods, are not developed out of a dialogue but rather from observation and under different lighting conditions. When Hugo follows his bizarre





2 AUGUST SANDER *Farmers' Children*, 1931

protagonists with the camera while they stretch towards the sun or sway in its warm rays, oblivious of what takes place around them, or captures them in harmonious colour in front of neutral backgrounds, he lends their craziness a certain dignity. He thus suddenly transforms a homeless woman, despite the visible traces of her life on the street, into a mild, Madonna-like apparition (ill. pp. 258–259). Without slipping into narration, Pieter Hugo now, for the first time, brings two image sequences together to create diptychs that make small movements discernible or a potential scream “audible” (ills. pp. 256–257 and 266–267). Dirt, wounds and signs of physical

decay are not forgotten, but he succeeds – through the intensive colour and light aesthetics of his *Wildflower* portraits and his familiar objective perspective – in evoking among his viewers not disgust, but rather a sense of sympathy for his “abnormal” protagonists. In their use of allegory, his photographed *objets trouvés*, which also accompany this series, reveal almost more about the social status of the people portrayed than the portraits themselves – an empty suitcase, a smashed watermelon or spilt milk (ills. pp. 264, 254 and 260).

As part of a white minority, Hugo sees himself as an outsider and can thus identify with the groups of people

he photographs. Here as well a parallel to Diane Arbus can be drawn: “There are always two things that happen. One is recognition and the other is that it’s totally peculiar. But there’s some sense in which I always identify with them [the people].”<sup>5</sup> Pieter Hugo’s solidarity manifests itself in the inclusion of self-portraits in his series, such as in the early portrait series entitled *Looking Aside* (2003–06), in which he portrayed blind people or white and black people with albinism with a stringency reminiscent of biometric passport photos. An even clearer language is expressed by his self-portrait with a woman’s wig and make-up (ills. pp. 26 and 298).

For Hugo subcultures are, however, not only represented by outwardly conspicuous individuals but also by societal phenomena and unusual lifestyles. The visually powerful and much discussed series *The Hyena & Other Men* (2005–07) and *Permanent Error* (2009–10), as well as *Wild Honey Collectors* (2005), are reportages in portrait format. Hugo thus travelled though Nigeria with the “Gadawan Kura”, a group of men who tame hyenas, snakes and monkeys and make a living from public performances with these animals and the sale of traditional medicine. He was not interested in the spectacle however. The results are symbiotically ambivalent portraits of men and animals which create incomprehensible contrasts to their urban context. For *Permanent Error* Hugo visited the electronic waste dump in Agbogbloshie, a suburb of Accra in Ghana, where children and adults from the neighbouring township attempt to extract recyclable materials from the illegally imported electronic waste from Europe. Like hunters and gatherers, they live virtually on and from the waste dump. Due to the extraction process using open fire, toxic substances pollute the air, groundwater and land, and contaminate vegetables, meats and fish. Agbogbloshie is quite popular throughout the city because of its large vegetable market, which borders on the waste dump. According to assessments made by environmental journalists such as Mike Anane, however, spending more than two hours at the site can actually be damaging to one’s health.<sup>6</sup> Pieter Hugo’s portrait of Abdulai Yahaya makes every particle of the aggressive soot on his skin

visible, reveals the slightly discoloured eyes, and distils in the face of the young man the harshness of the living environment visible in the background (ill. p. 177). In her white lace dress Naasra Yeti appears utterly surreal in the apocalyptic reality of the waste dump, while in another photo cows stay poised on the carpet of burnt technoid waste as though they were grazing on a green meadow (ills. pp. 170 and 172).

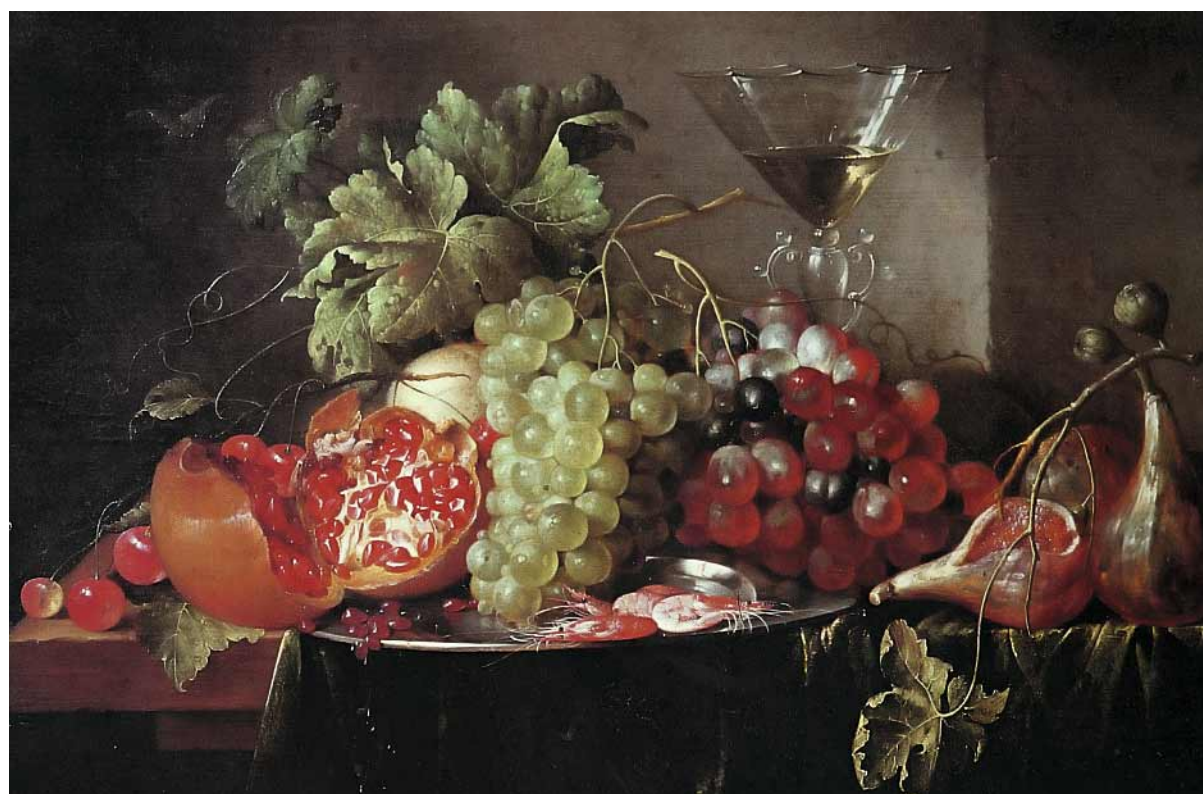
Pieter Hugo is not interested here in anonymous generalization. The portraits from nearly all the series bear the names of those portrayed, which accelerates and substantiates the viewer’s cognitive process – since that which appears unreal, especially in series such as *Permanent Error* and *The Hyena & Other Men*, is actually documented reality. The intensity of his portraits is due to the collaboration with the people he photographs, as his photos are rarely spontaneous. “The subject has to be willing to give something. I don’t want it to feel like the image was taken with me only taking. It needs and I hope for a moment of

voluntary vulnerability.”<sup>7</sup> The results are portraits with an intense sense of immediacy. Pieter Hugo brings the people close to viewers and overwhelms them with the extreme corporeality of those portrayed, with their physical and psychological presence. This humanity is often in contrast with the harshness of the social reality that surrounds them.

## Affected Realities

Although his photographic roots lie in photojournalism and reportage, Pieter Hugo has long since transgressed the border of the purely documentary and assumed an artistic position. As the various series – *Rwanda 2004*, *Permanent Error*, *Messina/Musina*, *Kin*, *Nollywood*, *There’s a Place in Hell for Me* and *My Friends*, *Flat Noodle Soup Talk* and *1994* – demonstrate, each of his work groups is founded upon the formulation of a question, a direct interest in an issue, a country or a particular society. His

6 JAN DAVIDSZ DE HEEM *Still Life with Fruit and Wine Glass*, c.1640–45





photographs never follow the principle of pure *l'art pour l'art*. Yet whereas the documentary photographer captures moments in largely unedited images, Hugo stages his portrait photos and modifies them – in *The Hyena & Other Men*, for example, by reducing the colour saturation. Whereas in doing so he intensifies the neutrality of his perspective, the manipulation of colour can also be seen as artistic device which individualizes his visual language. In *There's a Place in Hell for Me and My Friends* (2011–12), he goes one step further and accesses the “real-life situation” of his photographs in order to expose other realities. As in *Kin*, he creates portraits of friends from South Africa, while at the same time tapping into the formal stringency of *Looking Aside*. The portraits from the *Hell* series seem to function as a kind of stocktaking of people of all skin colours and are reminiscent of the physiognomic cataloguing of ethnographers in the early days of colonization or of police photographs (fig. 4 and ill. p. 190). The question as to what divides and connects

mankind takes on increased relevance when skin colour is suddenly no longer a primary distinguishing criterion. In the transformation process of the colour photographs of this series into black-and-white portraits, Pieter Hugo manipulates the colour channels so that skin colours become darker and begin to even out. Through the intensification of the melanin pigment, human imperfections become increasingly visible. Sparkling eyes protrude from dark, clown-like faces covered with blemishes and form a cross-culturally imperfect single entity. With a sense of humour, Hugo reserves a place in *Hell* for himself and his friends and not only thematizes senseless racial conflicts but also touches upon the question as to the meaning of reality in the age of digitization.

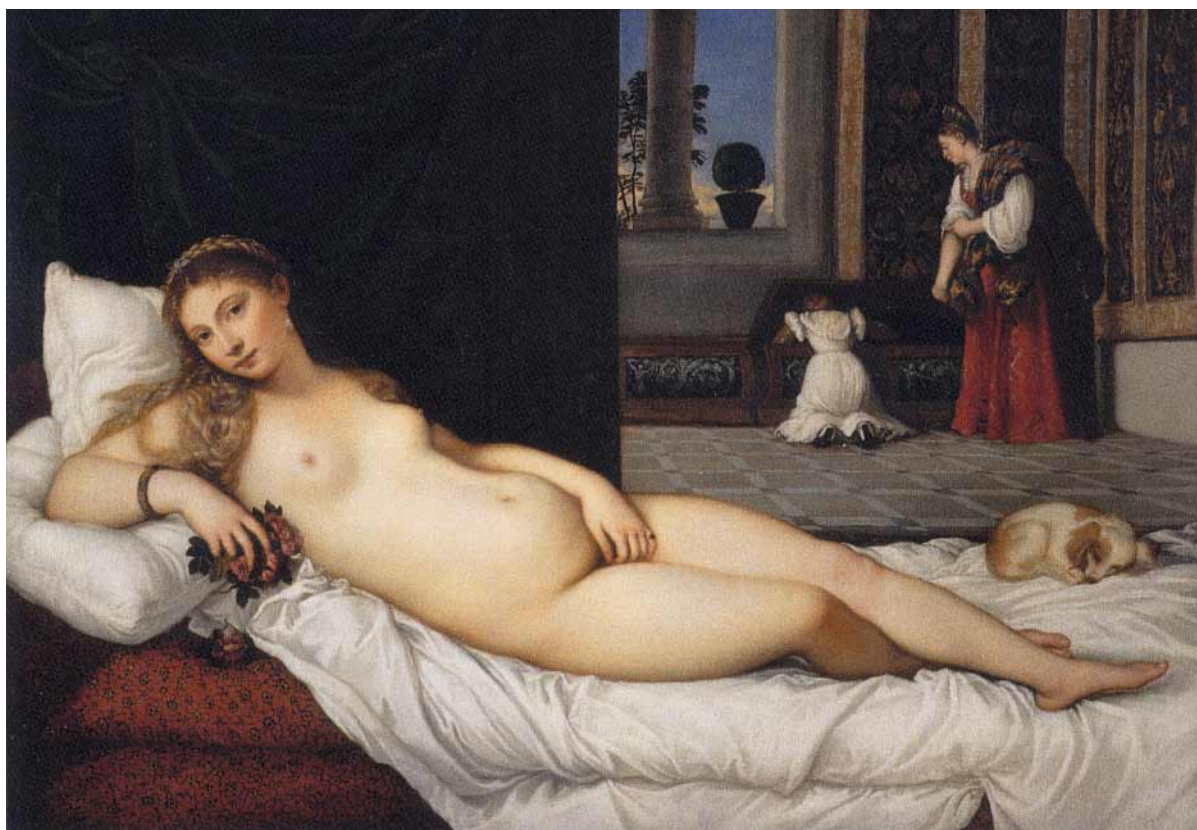
Hugo also plays with the boundaries between reality and *mise en scène* in other series, such as *Kin* and *1994*. Here clothing is used to pose questions regarding identity. Does a woman with bleeding eczemas on her face actually wear lace blouses and pearl necklaces

(ill. p. 147)? Where do the clothes worn in *1994* come from – do they belong to the children or to Hugo? In several portraits from these series he deliberately increases contradictions in an effort to challenge prejudices. Other “costumes” that bear meaning are actual relicts from the age of colonization, such as the robes and wigs of the *Judges of Botswana* (2005) and the *Barristers & Solicitors of the Supreme Court of Ghana* (2005), which now frame the faces of the black protagonists. The confusion is even more extreme in *Nollywood* (2008–09), a project for which Hugo worked together with actors from the world's third-largest film industry, using costumes and make-up to portray stereotypes from Nollywood films. As in the films themselves, these artistic stagings commingle elements from classical horror films, references to world cinema, traditions from their own country, and local colour: an almost naked Darth Vader (ill. p. 115), three youths whose white body painting recalls initiation rites (ill. p. 109), three action heroines in jeans

carrying machine guns (ill. p. 110), and a zombie who emerges out of a wrecked car (ill. p. 114). Viewed from a Eurocentric perspective, this series illustrates not only the cross-cultural and cross-traditional cinematic language of Nollywood but also a further facet of Pieter Hugo's work, namely humour.

In general it becomes apparent just how strongly Pieter Hugo's international perspective is influenced by the history of art and images. Classical poses, gradations of pictures within pictures, *vanitas* and still-life motifs, attributes and allegories. The portrait

5 TITIAN *Venus of Urbino*, 1538







4 **KARL WEULE** *Makua Women with the Most Common Scarification: Forehead and Temples Anointed with Oil, Frontal and Profile Views*, 1908

of *The Honourable Justice Moatlhodi Marumo* (2005) is thus reminiscent – due not only to the robe but also the chair and the pose – of historical pope and sovereign portraits, such as Velázquez’s portrait of Pope Innocent X (1650), while the nude portrait of Wu Qiuping on her chaise longue is transformed into a contemporary Chinese Venus in the spirit of Titian (fig. 5, ills. pp. 103 and 275).

The transformation of an art-historical vocabulary of style is, however, most obvious in Pieter Hugo’s still-life motifs, which he himself places within the context of seventeenth-century Dutch still life. Whereas the *Nollywood* still life with skull, bones and an ashtray is characterized by an almost exaggerated sense of allegory, which must be seen within the context of the series’ overall theme, the comparatively much subtler

still-life motifs in the *Kin* and *Flat Noodle Soup Talk* series evoke – not only with regard to subject matter but also because of the tenebrous lighting – the illusion of painting and seem strangely antiquated (fig. 6, ills. pp. 111 and 284). Their symbolism, however, has lost none of its topicality. The morbid transitory charm of Pieter Hugo’s still-life motifs nearly always appears to play on the state of society and the life of the people he portrays.

With his own unique artistic, direct and respectfully empathetic visual language, he uses his photographs to raise questions, shine light on realities and understand social and human wounds. “The world can be tough.

And tender at the same time,”<sup>8</sup> Pieter Hugo concludes in an interview from 2012, and formulates with this not only a world view but also a fitting description of his own work. Fully in line with this, his photographs do not provide any answers – instead, he leaves these quite deliberately “between the devil and the deep blue sea”.

- 1 See p. 225 in this publication.
- 2 Pieter Hugo, quoted in: Sandra Danicke, “Das Gegeneinander wird zum Nebeneinander. Pieter Hugo zeigt in seinem neuen Zyklus Kin seine Heimat Südafrika als schizophreneres Land”, in: *Art. Das Kunstmagazin*, June 2014, p. 33.
- 3 Pieter Hugo, interviewed by Serena Momberg, YouTube video, 5:09, posted by netinspirations.co.uk, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTWtrKd5biA> (accessed 14 December 2016).
- 4 Diane Arbus, quoted in: Peter Schjeldahl, “Looking Back: Diane Arbus at the Met”, in: *The New Yorker*, 21 March 2005, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/03/21/looking-back-8> (accessed 19 December 2016).
- 5 Diane Arbus, quoted in: *Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph*, Millerton, NJ 1972; repr. New York 2011, p. 1.
- 6 See Christina Teuthorn-Mohr, “Alles Schrott – Was der illegale Elektromüll in Ghana anrichtet”, *Bayern Radio 2*, 1 April 2013, <http://www.br.de/radio/bayern2/politik/breitengrad/ghana-muell-accr100.html> (accessed 18 December 2016).
- 7 Pieter Hugo, quoted in: “Pieter Hugo: Corporeality”, press release, Priska Pasquer, <http://priskapasquer.com/pieter-hugo-2/> (accessed 14 December 2016).
- 8 Pieter Hugo, interviewed by Anne Haeming, in “Ich wollte nie Müllporno-Händler werden” in: *Spiegel Online*, 28 May 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/fotograf-pieter-hugo-this-must-be-the-place-a-831209.html> (accessed 18 December 2016).



# Looking Aside

**SOUTH AFRICA  
2003-2006**



In the early 2000s, while living in ITALY, I started photographing people with albinism in various parts of the world. I was travelling as an assignment photographer and used the opportunity to explore my own interests while meeting professional obligations. My earliest portraits featured people naturalistically posed in ambient environments. As the project developed, I opted to narrow the focus to SOUTH AFRICA, as well as limit myself to producing only head-and-shoulders portraits taken with the aid of studio lights against a neutral backdrop.

A lot of the people I photographed had poor eyesight – it is one of the side effects of albinism – and worked in institutions for the visually impaired. This led me to extend the scope of my project to include people who were blind or partially sighted. The same feelings of discomfort I encountered photographing people with albinism arose when I photographed people with poor or no eyesight. The discomfort at encountering an unreciprocated gaze is, I think, self-imposed. It is not something the subjects feel.

While working on this body of work, I visited my grandmother in a frail-care centre. I recognized the same sense of discomfort around the elderly. My grandmother appears in this portrait series, as do I. It was the first of many self-portraits I have taken for display. I am both the maker and a kind of marginal protagonist in my series about marginalized people.

In this early body of work I explicitly took a confrontational stance, an attitude that is rehearsed in a lot of my subsequent work. It is an unflinching series. I want the subjects to match the intensity of my own gaze.

**SOUTH AFRICA**

I have often thought about the strict frame I settled on for this portrait series. I think it was informed by two trajectories of photography that emerged from apartheid **SOUTH AFRICA**. Photojournalism set out to inform the world about conditions in the country. Stylistically, it was indebted to the humanist traditions of twentieth-century American photography. I have never been comfortable with its lyrical vocabulary. At the same time, photography was being used by the state as a tool of classification and separation. All South Africans were required to carry a photo ID. My series turns this loaded compositional style on its head to document people marginalized by the glib visual propaganda of the “new”, liberated **SOUTH AFRICA**.

**PIETER HUGO  
CAPE TOWN  
2016**

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