

Breaking out of the comfort zone of white normality

Whiteness isn't normal – it needs to be made strange. So argues photographer Michelle Booth, whose provocative exhibition, 'Seeing White', raises discomfoting questions about race. Special Writer Michael Morris reports.

In our hearts, we knew that South Africa was going to be okay when the beer commercials on television began to show us what we had always hoped was true of our fractured society: blacks and whites could be normal people, having fun, dressing smart, sharing jokes, taking time out from promising careers to do what all normal people do.

Magazines mirrored the same hopeful imagery ... sexy black models in lacy underwear; boardroom tableaux in which the most serious ebony was something other than the tasteful furnishing; cheerful pictures of the nursery school in which, we imagined, little Thandi would be recognised by her playmates as the little girl in the red jersey.

It was, an is, all so normal, an ordinary world – at last – in which everyone was getting on just fine, doing ordinary things, sharing the same hopes and dreams, all in one world.

Or so it seemed.

The flaw, though, is a fundamental one, Michelle Booth suggests.

This unexceptional world of business, fashion, leisure, careers, restaurant dinners and leafy playschools – the universe of post-apartheid promise – is a white world which everybody else was, after long being denied entry, invited to join.

The standard of ordinariness is whiteness. But that's unspoken, taken for granted, unnamed. The entrants to it are what Booth – and writers who have dealt with this subject – call "raced", they are named as blacks or coloureds or Indians.

The moment they become airline pilots, stockbrokers, mortgage holders, head prefects, restaurant patrons, they are named by race, and often applauded for it, and they represent not just themselves but their category.

And this is so because the world they now occupy is not a "normal" one, but a constructed world of whiteness, where whites assume is the ordinary one they always occupied, and expect everyone else to conform to, learn to be comfortable in and enjoy for the virtues it offers.

To some extent, the furore over racism in rugby – and the common refrain that "this is being blown out of all proportion ... let's get on with rugby" – reflects the impatience of many whites with the recurring intrusion of race as a "problem" in a country that espouses non-racial values.

One of the most striking things about Booth's exhibition is that there is not a black face to be seen in any of its more than a dozen images. It is almost affronting, this curious exclusivity, in an era of avowed equality.

But this precisely underlines its intention.

It is at once a simple idea and a complex one, a notion that's easily mistaken for an intellectual self-indulgence.

It has made some people angry.

"Your (sic) a damn racist", one visitor to the exhibition has written in the book Booth has for people to write their comments in.

"I fear you have fallen into the trap of racism yourself," another writes. "Your work annoys and disappoints me," said a third.

But some have got the point. One among them comments that the work is "bound to make people uncomfortable, but (is) very necessary".

What makes people uncomfortable – and what is very necessary – Booth agrees, is that whiteness isn't normal, and it needs to be made strange.

"I am saying that whiteness is a system of power relations. It does not mean we are bad, but it does mean that there's a structure that privileges whites. And it's insidious, because what keeps it in place is the belief that it is normal.

"For white people especially, our 'normal' is a construct."

Booth argues, as long as white people fail to acknowledge this, they will always struggle to be free of the burden of their race, or of the stigma of racism that gets in the way of forming genuine relationships with people who are not white.

Booth speaks as an inhabitant of this world, and argues that her exhibition is as much an exploration of her own experience as it is of the experience of the bulk of whites for whom daily life in the "constructed world of privilege" is the definition of normality.

And she offers her pictures not as an accusing illustration of disadvantage and exploitation, but a stimulus to re-thinking – or seeing anew – the opportunity to extract something genuinely positive.

She suggest that it is only by breaking out of the comfort zone of white normality, which requires risk-taking, that whites will be able to occupy a "co-authored space" in which it is possible to form real relationships with fellow South Africans that are free of the anxieties and mistrust of the past.

South Africa, she says, remains an "abnormal" society, in part because whiteness remains invisible to those whose privilege it ensures.

The difficulty is that “the flip side of the victim mentality of being white is to take advantage of the privilege that whiteness bestows and call it normal”, ignoring the fact that it is a construct of power that is felt by blacks as an imposition that irks or offends or hurts.

Thus, “as whites, we must be willing to face ourselves as other know us. We must begin to imagine what it must be like to be the ‘Other’ for a black someone” and to hold up white “normality” as a questionable rather than a given, ordinary quality.

As a photographic exhibition, the work has none of the technical precision and crisp allure that go with traditional expectations of exhibited camera work.

Booth took the pictures with a plastic Kodak brownie camera that has what she describes as “very limited technical capabilities”. It couldn’t deliver a breathtaking Ansel Adams landscape.

Her intention in this was to “further suggest the ordinariness” of the images and remove as much as possible her own intervention as photographer.

“I wanted images that portrayed the deliberate normality of scenes”, and they are images that match the imperfections, but also the immediacy, of the amateur snapshot.

Her point would be impossible to read from the images alone: shots such as a woman leaving a café fiddling with her purse, a table of four at a smart restaurant, two men and two women walking down government avenue, a man standing beneath a bra advertisement outside a shopping centre, a slightly blurred image of a young bearded guy loping down a city street ...

Booth was not interested in the individual subjects – who just “happen to appear at that place at that time” – but in the shots collective portrayal of a generalised “white” experience.

“My intention is to question the ‘reality’ which constitutes the set of assumptions of white South Africans.”

What provokes the philosophical questions is the “framing” of the pictures by quotations, sandblasted on to the glass, from a range of writings on whiteness, on what it is to be white, privileged, powerful, “normal”.

The apparently inconsequential images only gain meaning when viewed through the texts that frame them.

The extracts are taken from, among others, Melissa Steyn’s book, *Whiteness Just Isn’t What It Used To Be*, Alice McIntyre’s *Making Meaning of Whiteness*, and Richard Dyer’s *White*.

Typical of them are the following: “The point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it”, and “White power reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness but as normal”.

And that, Michelle Booth insists, is why whiteness “needs to be made strange”.

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