

## ***Bobson Studio Portraits***

### **Accompanying text for an online exhibition**

My interest in studio photography came via *Revue Noire* magazines and publications borrowed from the South African National Gallery library in 1994. That is where and how I discovered the photography of Mountaga Dembélé, Seydou Keita, Malick Sidibé, Abderramane Sakaly and Felix Diallo among others.

Viewing an actual exhibition of photography in that specific genre only came in February 1997 when I offered to be a social photographer to the opening of *Black Photo Album 1890 – 1950*. The South African National Gallery, where I was working at the time (not as a photographer) hosted this exhibition at its then satellite space, The Natale Labia Museum in Muizenberg. South African photographer Santu Mofokeng curated the exhibition which featured a collection of digitally reworked 19th century colonial studio portraits of black South African families. In Mofokeng's opening address he noted that "when we look at them we believe them, for they tell us a little about how these people imagined themselves. We see these images in the terms determined by the subjects themselves, for they have made them their own."

At the end of 1997, I came across an exhibition catalogue entitled *Street Dreams*, which opened a completely new window into the genre of studio photography. The exhibition, *Street Dreams: Contemporary Indian Studio Photographs from the Satish Sharma Collection* was hosted at Standpoint Gallery in London in 1997. Sharma writes in the catalogue introduction "these photographs, though, are more than just a consciously mediated form of self-representation. These images are the signs and the icons of their times. They reflect the reality of a contemporary world, a world where a religious mythology continues to be a permanent and powerful presence."

The following year I had the privilege of being introduced to the photographs of South Africa's own studio photographer, Sukdeo Bobson Mohanlall. Durban-born photographer Lance Slabbert, then an acclaimed surf photographer whose images had earned him international recognition, had befriended Mohanlall and regularly visited his studio in Cross Street. When Mohanlall told Slabbert that he was going to destroy all of the studio's colour negatives from the 1970's, Slabbert advised strongly against it. Mohanlall needed to create storage space; the market demands had changed and camera accessories and batteries had become his primary business. Instead of destroying the negatives, the two decided to collaborate on an exhibition. Slabbert produced a series of work entitled *Street Style*. A makeshift studio was set up on Durban's busy inner city streets and Slabbert invited passers-by to have their portraits taken. Mohanlall printed a selection of his 1970's colour negatives which then became known as the *Bobson Studio Portraits*. The exhibition opened at Durban's NSA Gallery in September 1998. It was Mohanlall's first exhibition, and unbeknownst to him then, the first of many more to follow.

Sukdeo Bobson Mohanlall was the owner of Bobson Studio in Durban, which led to the assumed name of Mr Bobson, or Bobby Bobson. It opened on Durban's Cross Street at the corner of Alice Street, in 1961. Mohanlall and I never met personally; we only ever spoke on the telephone, regularly and for long periods. He told me about his interest in photography, his collecting habits, and his working days at a photographic processing firm. Bobson Studio was opened when Mohanlall and a long-time friend were both retrenched from that company.

In the early days, just after they opened their studio, the business operated each day of the week, and weekend days were the busiest. Throughout the 1960's all the printing, then only in black-and-white, was done on the premises. I never saw any of the black-and-white hand prints from that time. It could be that by the time Slabbert advised Mohanlall against destroying his colour negatives, the black-and-white negatives may have already been destroyed.

Mohanlall told me how on weekend days, the lines of mainly twenty to thirty year-old customers would snake down Cross and Alice streets. I regret never asking him about his backdrops, thus I have no idea as to how often he changed these, if ever. Customers brought their own clothes, beads and accessories, occasionally leaving things behind. These items were collected in cart-board boxes, stored behind the backdrops where they can be seen in the portraits along with shoes and socks pushed aside by those being photographed. Mohanlall told me that the beadwork featured in most of his *Bobson Studio Portraits* was from the Ndwandwe tribe who lived in an area just outside Durban known as the Valley of a Thousand Hills.

Bobson Studio's customers were lining up to have their portraits taken, for purposes of sending them as postcards to relatives who lived outside the city. These postcards symbolised prosperity, success, and to an extent, the subject's flirtation with modernity.

By the early 1970's the industry had changed, with a greater demand for colour photography. Unlike most of the studios elsewhere in Africa, Mohanlall embraced the change and found a colour processing firm in Durban to handle his printing. It would be the images from this era that brought Mohanlall his legacy. At the time of his death the trusted Yashica Matt camera, used to take all those photographs, was proudly displayed in the studio. My second regret – we never really spoke about the actual photographs – the taking of the images – apart from the camera that was used.

I hosted Mohanlall and Slabbert's two-part exhibition at AREA Gallery in Cape Town in December 1998. This was when I met Giordano Raffaelli from Trento, Italy. Raffaelli became Mohanlall's first international collector. The following year the photographs were selected for *In-Transit* – an exhibition of contemporary South African art organised by the Swiss Arts Council Pro-Helvetia; the exhibition was on view in Zurich, Switzerland.

In 1999, I met Dr Christraud Geary; she was in Cape Town for an international photography conference held at the South African Museum. We spoke at length about the studio portraits and the fact that Mohanlall had retained the negatives but no information about the subjects, no names or where they were from. This issue remains deeply problematic however, as an archive it is an important collection of images and a valuable asset in terms of the history of studio photography practise in South Africa. Geary encouraged the exhibition of the material. My proposal to the South African Museum's then director, Dr Patricia Davidson was successful and the *Bobson Studio Portraits* and Slabbert's *Street Style* exhibitions went on view at the institution and thus formed part of the conference.

In 2000, I facilitated the sale of a large order of *Bobson Studio Portraits* for Studio d'Arte Raffaelli. Unable to travel at seven months pregnant, my husband went to Durban to make the acquisition. Mohanlall was extremely pleased with the sale but even happier when he convinced my husband to also purchase one of the studio's hand-coloured portraits in its original wooden frame. [In the 1980's and 1990's Bobson Studio's main business had shifted away from taking studio portraits in favour of hand-colouring old black-and-white prints.]

In February 2001, Studio d'Arte Raffaelli in Trento, Italy, hosted a solo exhibition entitled *Bobson Portraits* and published an exhibition catalogue for which I wrote the catalogue essay. For this essay, Mohanlall sent me a photograph of his studio taken from the outside. It was very small, with a recessed front door, and glass display windows on either side showing an assortment of framed portraits. The back wall was central in this photograph; two red curtains are pushed aside to reveal a tranquil mountainous landscape. A ring of fake flowers, at head-height, was attached to this backdrop. The demand for studio portraits had long died off, but Mohanlall never altered the interior of his studio.

In 2002, Mohanlall's portraits were included in an exhibition *Passport to South Africa, Contemporary South African Art*, which was hosted at the Trevi Cultural Centre in Bolzano. William Kentridge, Marlene Dumas, Willie Bester and Sam Nhlengethwa were amongst the featured artists.

Mohanlall was fatally shot behind the same counter he had stood serving his customers for more than forty years. The two gun-armed youths who escaped with R 40.00 in cash, were later caught sitting on the sidewalk drinking Coca-Cola that they had just purchased with the stolen money. Mohanlall's daughter Premilla called to give me this tragic news. In my last conversation with Mohanlall, he urged me to hurry up; I had promised him a black and white portrait of myself for hand-colouring, something I had promised to do for more than two years. Mohanlall had been working with a handful of artists in Durban who had been hand-colouring his black-and-white prints for decades, and his favourite artist was ageing. He was very proud of these portraits, despite their dwindling market appeal.

I laughed when Mohanlall, in our last conversation in December 2002, and by then in his seventies, told me that his wife was not happy with him still going to the studio every day.

She wanted him to retire. I knew that he would be back in the New Year; he said so, “Bobson Studio was his life and his retirement”. He had handed the business over to his eldest son Vicky, to manage the day-to-day business, but Mohanlall Senior continued to go to work each day. His death deprived me of more than just a hand-coloured portrait, but I was left with fond memories and the privilege of having known and worked with Bobby Bobson. Despite the numerous sales which I had facilitated over the years I only had one print in my private collection at the time of his death – authentically printed under Mohanlall Senior’s sanctioned and colour-specific supervision.

Our online exhibition, *Studio Photography* is presented in the memory of the great studio photographer, Sukdeo Mohanlall, also known as Bobby Bobson. It references images from the *Street Dreams* exhibition catalogue and a series of studio portraits created by gallery artist Lindeka Qampi.

-Heidi Erdmann, April 2016