

Blacked Out

Identities of Whiteness in the Work of Hentie van der Merwe

Jessica Schons

Abstract

This paper will attempt to illustrate the ways in which ‘whiteness’ as a race has been addressed in the work of South African artist Hentie van der Merwe. Two works, *Untitled* (1997) and the *Trappings* series (2000-2003) will serve to explore the means by which whiteness was established as the norm through its very representational absence in apartheid’s visual culture in which race was primarily expressed through the black body. Drawing on the remains of this visual culture passed down in the form of archives, van der Merwe’s works investigate the ways in which official, universally visible and institutionalized archives render ‘white’ as a race utterly invisible, while personal, ‘hidden’ archives, such as Hugh MacFarlane’s homoerotic photographs used in *Untitled*, can be employed to make visible and offer alternative readings of race. The body and skin as racial markers, both accentuated and masked by clothing and the military uniform in particular in the *Trappings* series, and put on show in ways ignored or even denied by supremacist Afrikaner ideology in *Untitled*, are reassessed by the artist through an investigation into how South African archives have constructed particular aspects of the concept of whiteness through the male body and a stereotyped notion of masculinity. It will be argued that through new readings and the reassembling of archives from a range of different sources van der Merwe renders visible the construction of race and whiteness themselves, all the while questioning the validity of these concepts in contemporary South African society.

Résumé

Cette étude se propose d’illustrer les manières dont la “blanchitude” comme race a été traitée dans le travail de l’artiste sud-africain Hentie van der Merwe. Deux œuvres, *Untitled* (1997) et la série *Trappings* (2000-2003) serviront de base afin d’explorer les moyens par lesquels la blanchitude avait été établie en tant que norme, précisément à travers son absence, dans la culture visuelle de l’apartheid où la race était avant tout exprimée à travers le corps de couleur. Travaillant à partir des rémanents de cette culture visuelle aujourd’hui devenue existante sous forme d’archives, l’œuvre de Van der Merwe explore les multiples façons dont les archives officielles, universellement accessibles et institutionnalisées, rendent la blanchitude en tant que race complètement invisible. Par ailleurs, des archives personnelles « dissimulées », telles que les photographies homoérotiques de Hugh MacFarlane présentes dans *Untitled*, peuvent être employées pour matérialiser et donner des lectures alternatives de la notion de race. Le corps et la peau comme marqueurs sociaux, tous deux accentués et masqués par l’accoutrement ainsi que l’uniforme militaire, en particulier dans la série *Trappings*, et mis en lumière dans *Untitled* de manières ignorées ou même niées par l’idéologie suprématiste Afrikaner, sont réexaminés par l’artiste à

travers une recherche sur la manière dont les archives sud-africaines ont généré des aspects particuliers du concept de blanchitude à travers la corporalité et une notion stéréotypée de la masculinité. Il sera discuté du fait que, à travers de nouvelles lectures et la reconstitution d'archives de provenances diverses, Van der Merwe met à jour la construction du concept de race et de la blanchitude elles-mêmes, tout en questionnant la probité de ces concepts dans la société sud-africaine contemporaine.

Keywords

whiteness; masculinity; race; hegemony; white normativity; archive; Hentie van der Merwe; South Africa; apartheid; soldier figure

The West has a long history of assuring its hegemony by promoting a paradigm of the self that defines itself by opposition to the 'other'. This other, as pointed out by Melissa Steyn, represents the very essence of what the West rejects: it is uncivilised and primitive, unaware of higher moral values and prone to abide to wanton practices that attest to its underdeveloped nature (10). In an effort to document such distinctions, the other soon became the favourite object of investigation for nineteenth and early twentieth (century European (but also, to a lesser degree, American) criminologists, anthropologists and eugenicists – a practice certainly facilitated by the advent of photography, whose perceived representational neutrality supposedly allowed for an objective and accurate visibilisation of difference. The emerging practice of anthropometry, a measuring of the body with the goal to determine psychological factors such as morality and intelligence, led to a classification and categorisation of social types, ordered into neat packages of varying degrees of deviancy from a perceived norm (Sekula 10-11).

Otherness being in this way primarily defined by the visual markers of the body, the latter became the ground upon which ideologies of supremacy and inferiority were inscribed. Out of a visual culture reflecting social conventions of the time were born large photographic archives that Allan Sekula has so convincingly discussed as reflecting the dynamics of power and privilege found at the heart of nineteenth century European bourgeois society (10-11). Otherness in its multitude of shapes and forms, mapped out at the heart of these archives, gave the European subject the opportunity to define itself as the norm by remaining largely absent from representation, while yet metaphorically prevailing through the body of the other.

In colonial contexts, where race plays a major role in the creation and perpetuation of social hierarchies established on the principle of difference, skin colour becomes one of the main features through which otherness is defined (Steyn 17). From those colonial contexts, relying heavily on visual representations of otherness as inferior, emerged a culture of images that was dominated by a language of stark contrasts between racial markers, and that in a sub-Saharan setting majorly translated into the concepts of 'blackness' and 'whiteness'. Establishing its normativity by remaining largely absent from visual culture, the latter denies its corporeality by expressing 'race' through the black body as the antagonistic pole to whiteness (Steyn 102). Resulting from this dynamics is the white coloniser's

undeniable privilege of not only being able to overcome differences within the group of settlers of European descent and consider themselves part of a larger collectivity standing together against a (mainly) black majority, but also permits a show of strength that hinges on the ideological uniformity of whiteness as an over-arching concept maintaining a regulated status quo. For this purpose, colonial photography developed particularly sophisticated systems of documenting racial anthropometries. Some of the more influential methods included those elaborated by the anthropologist John Lamprey and the anatomist Thomas Henry Huxley, both of whom developed more or less complex systems of racial differentiation, that were based primarily on a charting of physical markers. Lamprey in particular resorted to grid-like measuring units as a tool for facilitating physical measurements of racial body types and documenting them visually through photography (Allan and Van der Merwe).

The visual heritage of whiteness in South Africa is investigated in two works by artist Hentie van der Merwe. The first work that I wish to discuss here, *Untitled*, consists of a series of photographs taken by Hugh MacFarlane, a photographer from Pretoria, during World War II. MacFarlane had been commissioned to document Namibian recruits, whom he photographed from the front, the back and the side against a tiled wall resembling a grid – a measuring unit doubtlessly intended to ease identification. The pictures, which were found in the photographer’s possession after his death, along with a rather large collection of homoerotic and pornographic photography, in order to be saved from destruction by relatives were consequently handed across South Africa’s gay community and integrated into a hidden and migrant archive (Bester 64). *Trappings* is the second work to which I will be referring, a series of photographed military uniforms on display at the Museum of Military History in Johannesburg. Taking as his subject military dress from the Anglo-Boer War, the two World Wars and the Angolan War, Van der Merwe applies a blurring effect to the pictures through long exposure times and a handheld camera, obfuscating their particularities and emphasising their role as nostalgic remnants of a bygone era.

Hentie van der Merwe’s engagement with archives in his artistic practice stems in part from his own upbringing in an Afrikaans society where assumptions about whiteness and masculinity are still a prevalent factor in defining cultural identity (Murinik 386). *Untitled* addresses issues of the body, and in particular the white male body, as a historically and archivally defined entity, and interrogates not only a public perception about the body, but also involves the personal experience of the artist as a young gay man in contemporary Afrikaner society. Instead of refuting the notions of masculinity and whiteness, the artist seeks to redefine them according to what Leon de Kock has called a “difference within” or an “internal alterity”, counteracting an all-inclusive description of the above-mentioned concepts and emphasising diversity at their heart (177).

Untitled, when first shown at the Generator Art Space in Johannesburg in 1997 (Fig. 1 and 2), was set in a darkened room whose walls were wallpapered with the pictures of the soldiers. The viewer, in order to observe the installation, had to content themselves with contemplating the work from afar, physical entry to the exhibition space being blocked by a glass screen. With *Untitled* Van der Merwe draws on a visual vocabulary originating in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth century archives, intending to map out and measure bodies anthropometrically. Through the grid the artist evokes the practice of ‘othering’ through the controlling gaze of the photographer, in an instance

where such power relations are reversed and the white male subject traditionally standing behind the camera now finds himself in front of the lens.

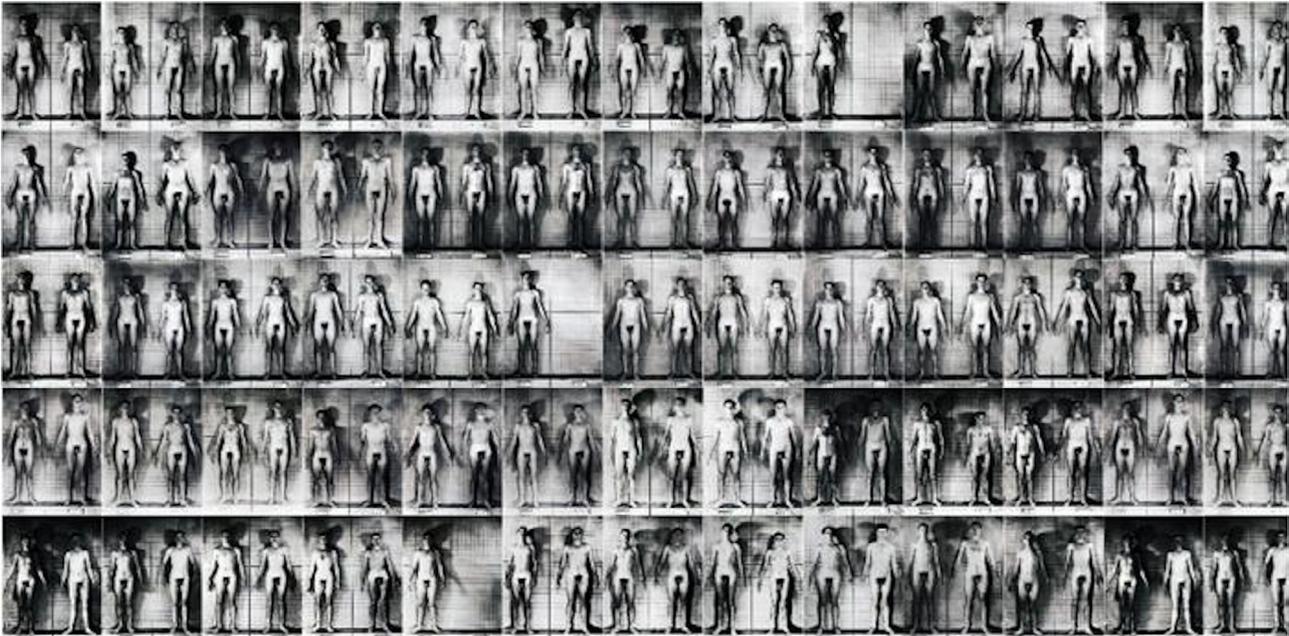


Fig. 1: Hentie van der Merwe, Untitled, 1997, installation detail

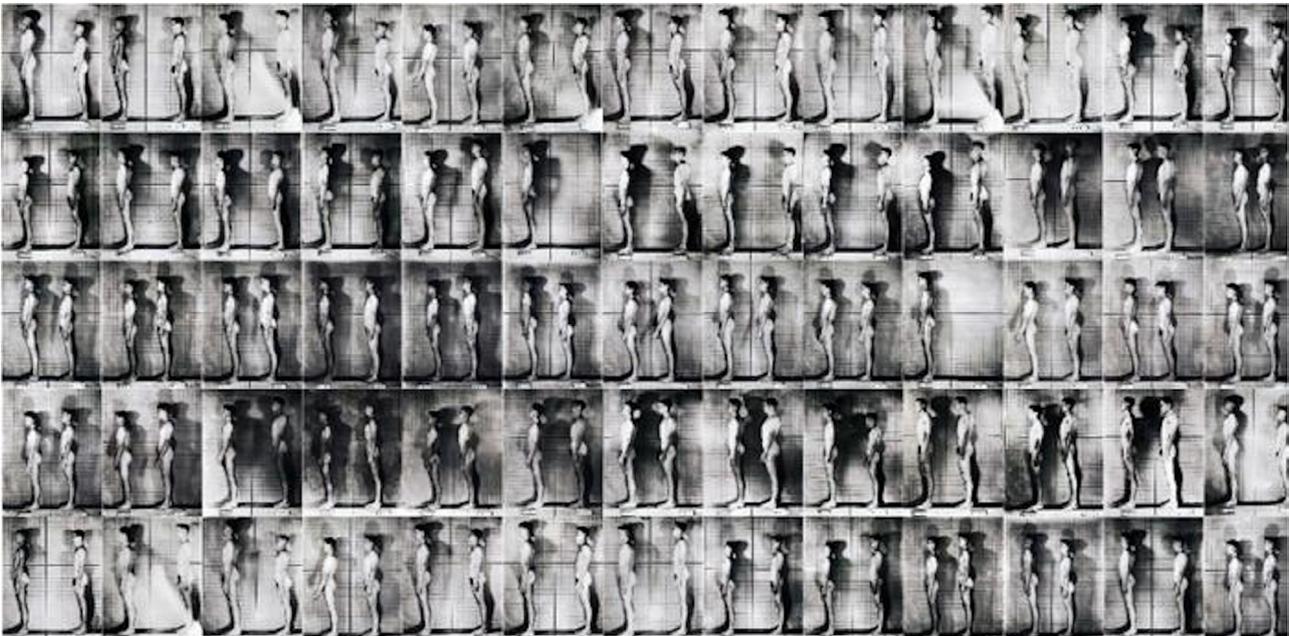


Fig. 2. : Hentie van der Merwe, Untitled, 1997, installation detail

As Patricia Vertinsky has pointed out, the ‘other’ was not the sole object of eugenicists’ scientific investigations: in fact, for a good part of the twentieth century, American college students from some of the best universities in the country were systematically photographed from the front, the back and the side, all in the nude; one of the most important instigators of such anthropometric studies was William Herbert Sheldon, who developed a classificatory system with the intent to determine temperament, intelligence and mentality which he believed was directly related to the physical body types of the students (293-294). This approach however not only led to a typology of class, with the upper class, educated university attendants being treated as the bodily healthier and more beautiful subjects of investigation, but also intensified a racial typology, as the belief in the lesser corporal and thus psychological qualifications of non-Western individuals persisted in Sheldon’s model (Vertinsky 300). Like two sides of the same coin, both the norm and the ab-norm were thus believed to be in one way or another reflected on the surface of the body.

It is indeed interesting to note that contrary to so-called traditional anthropology, MacFarlane seemed more interested in photographing the white male body usually exempt from anthropological studies, probably in a Sheldonian attempt to document the specific body types associated with physical ability, particularly that of the soldier (Allan and Van der Merwe). It is with this particularity that Van der Merwe works in *Untitled*, demonstrating that the parameters of normativity expressed photographically with the help of the grid system were very much part of promoting specific types, in this case a particular kind of white masculinity, with the aim to ideologically support the stance of the South African nation in the tumultuous time that was the Second World War and the immediate post-war era. However, Hugh MacFarlane’s photographs, as documents associated both with a colonial power structure exercising control, and the gay community as an underground movement, *Untitled* inevitably questions unilateral interpretations and ultimately challenges both whiteness and masculinity as historically fixed concepts.

Vron Ware has noted that “[w]hen a country is involved in active military operations, the figure of the soldier becomes an especially rich object of investigation, one that is highly symbolic of how the nation is constituted” (60). The army as the physical manifestation of a nation’s power becomes the battleground upon which the country’s strength is measured, both physically and symbolically. As a hegemonic power structure, it mirrors in its composition the social values it ought to defend in times of conflict, ideologies that are reflected through the figure of the soldier as the icon of both military and national collectivity and integrity. Historically, the photographs discussed here are chronologically situated only five years prior to the official introduction of the apartheid system in South Africa, an era during which an image of nationhood iconified through the white, male and masculine body became increasingly important, especially for an Afrikaner community of which an important part felt an affiliation with Third Reich ideologies of Aryan superiority (Tinker 146).

Hugh MacFarlane’s soldier photographs can, in this way, be read as reflecting an ideological expression of national strength, reproducing, at the same time, the canon of whiteness in relation to which privilege was largely measured in opposition to a (black) Other. In fact, as Neil Roos has noted, privilege within the South African army during and after World War II was supported by the prohibition for women, blacks and coloureds to carry arms, a right reserved for the white, male and majorly Afrikaans speaking, soldier (649). The grid against which the recruits are photographed therefore not simply

identifies the soldiers individually, but measures their compliance to a norm, which here clearly hinges on their status as white men. Identification and identity thus confounded, the nudity of the volunteers not so much documents their individual traits, but primarily attests to their skin colour and gender, both prerequisites for their position within the military and a larger social context. However, the grid so often employed to document the deviancy of the other in colonial archives here refrains from any allusion to sexuality, while emphasising the *sex* of the soldiers, insisting on their matter-of-fact male-ness.

MacFarlane's study thus at the same time highlights and conceals the soldiers' sexuality. As has been argued by Julian B. Carter, the West came to regard heterosexuality as a sexual norm underlying the very concept of whiteness, the latter setting itself apart from the lack of sexual restraint attributed to non-whites (78). Heteronormativity soon paralleled the normativity of whiteness and, for that matter, hegemonic masculinity, all of which stood as oppositions to sexual orientations perceived as deviant, including, but not limited to, homosexuality. Archives such as MacFarlane's soldier photographs helped to historically delineate and fix those normativities, and laid the basis for a very rigid perception of 'the norm' against which privilege was measured and distributed.

The installation of *Untitled* at the same time amplifies the spectator's position as the surveyor of conformity, and destabilises them by pointing at the different contexts Hugh MacFarlane's photographs adhered to. Not only Van der Merwe's own experience as a gay man differing from the perceived norm of white male heterosexuality, but also MacFarlane's occupation as a photographer for the *Physique* magazine – the latter an unacknowledged support for the reproduction of homoerotic pictures – takes the photographs out of their heteronormative shell and hints at multiple possibilities of interpretation (Allan and Van der Merwe). It also attests to the ways in which archives can be muted by dominant ideologies, in this case by the tenet of homosexuality's abnormality, resulting in its inadmissibility as an alternative version of masculinity (Du Pisani 169). The grid thus suddenly becomes the tool for a mapping out of both normativity and abnormality: the same subjects identified as conforming to an 'acceptable' identity are now deviating from the norm, resisting unilateral categorisations and as a consequence opposing the very idea of a normative, homogenous whiteness and masculinity inherent to a patriarchal Afrikaner society (Crous 53).

The dominant narrative of the strong, white, heterosexual male becomes blurred, adding a range of possible interpretations problematizing the historically fixed meaning of the snapshots. By re-contextualising the photographs in *Untitled*, Van der Merwe illustrates that identity is inscribed from outside and dependent on the insertion of an archive into a particular socio-cultural and historical context – here the immediate pre-apartheid era – a position that nevertheless renders archives as authoritative versions of the past extremely vulnerable, making them open to constant reinterpretation and weakening the very concepts of whiteness and masculinity they ought, in this case, to promote. Although the identities of the men as soldiers were temporary, they came to be understood as the uniform 'body' of whiteness and masculinity, reflecting a dominant ideology efficiently effacing alternative ways of 'being white' or 'being male', all in favour of a homogeneous representation of hegemonic power. The unilateral representation of identity illustrates the exclusiveness of archives in shaping a specific version of historical truth, a feature that *Untitled* successfully problematizes.

Untitled uses male nudity and naked skin to address gender and racial identity respectively –

investigating practices of hiding and revealing dichotomous aspects of identity that are mirrored by the ways in which archival contents are contextually and alternatingly concealed and conveyed, Hentie van der Merwe takes this idea further in *Trappings*, a series of photographs shot between 2000 and 2003. Where *Untitled* draws upon a hidden archive to reveal the relationship between physically articulated visible and invisible identities of whiteness and masculinity, the *Trappings* series portrays the ways in which official, universally visible an institutionalised archives can both mark and conceal whiteness and masculinity in over-emphasising their symbolic expressions, in this case the military dress.

The *Trappings* series examines the archive of white supremacist sovereignty in Southern Africa by documenting the historical remnants of the establishment and maintenance of that rule up until the end of the apartheid era. As Kevin Mulhearn has pointed out, most of the uniforms Van der Merwe photographs are of a symbolic order and differ from the military clothing worn to battle; they are displays of power, meant to be seen by those at whom their message is directed (n. pag.). However, contrary to *Untitled*, the *Trappings* series entirely omits the human body in its flesh, focussing instead on the absence of corporeality by highlighting the emptiness of the uniforms, mostly jackets and vests, but also more specialised accoutrements such as wet suits (Sverakova 3). The blurring effect Van der Merwe applies accentuates the ghost-like presence of the uniforms and underlines their emptiness – as Mulhearn puts it, they become the “exoskeleton” of whiteness (n. pag.).

The shell-like nature of the uniforms emphasises the ways in which both whiteness and masculinity as the perpetrators of colonial violence are clothed in heroism – an aspect further accentuated by the artist’s use of the matter-of-fact titles of his works, borrowed directly from the museum display. *Cape Mounted Rifles (Dukes)*, *Bandsman (1913-1926)* for example, if not for its title, is blurred to the point that its form becomes almost unrecognisable (Fig. 3). Hovering in an undefined space, the red and white colouring vaguely resembles a male torso; the costume however is sustained by a force other than the individual wearing it, held up by its own metaphysical corporeality. The photograph therefore not only underlines the gratuitousness of the wearer, but highlights its own inherent power of ‘dressing’ the individual in the momentary identity of the representative of whiteness and its supremacist rule.



Fig. 3: Hentie van der Merwe, “*Cape Mounted Rifles (Dukes)*, *Bandsman (1913-1926)*”, *Trappings*, 2000-2003

As in *Untitled*, van der Merwe foregrounds his concern with how identity, and particularly racial and gender identities, are inscribed onto the body from the outside. In another photograph of the series, *Transvaal Scottish (8th Infantry) Sergeant (1945-1951)* (Fig. 4), the very attires that ought to express individual merit, such as decorations and medals, blend into an out of focus picture completely anonymising the subject, making identity dependant on the attributes the dominant narrative of male whiteness is prepared to administer (Mulhearn n. pag.). Merit turns into a double-edged sword: power comes at the cost of individuality, and again, identification is at once assimilated with and opposed to identity. However, the naked skin as the marker of white masculinity is eclipsed in favour of its concealment behind the very symbols of whiteness which become the icons of white, patriarchal rule.

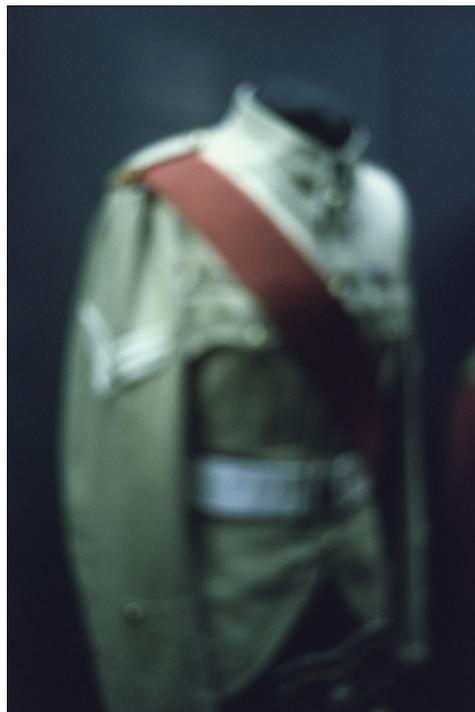


Fig. 4: Hentie van der Merwe, “Transvaal Scottish (8th Infantry), Sergeant (1945-1951)”, Trappings, 2000-2003

Problematizing the museum display of the uniforms as open books into a nation’s history, Van der Merwe not only demonstrates that military dress as an archive expresses the constructed-ness of history in a unilateral fashion and reflective of a dominant narrative exclusive of alternative histories, but examines, through the blurring effect, the multiple and often contradictory faces of both whiteness and masculinity. Perhaps most emblematic of this investigation are the two photographs *A Member of 32 Battallion Reconnaissance Wing* and *Wet Suit, World War II*. Contrary to the other pictures in the series, the presence of the head garb prevents them from being completely beheaded, although, similar to the jackets, they remain strangely headless. In fact, the ambiguity innate to both works is accentuated through the impossibility of attesting to the emptiness of the headwear, evoking an almost threatening presence through the veiling of the facial part in *A Member of 32 Battallion* (Fig. 5) and its substitution with a black void in *Wet Suit* (Fig. 6). Instead of a glorious promotion of military heroism through medals and decorations, both dresses remain relatively bleak, referring like no other to the physical

and psychological violence inflicted in times of war and in the name of white colonial rule supported by a specific version of masculinity. They also unveil another, perhaps even more troubling aspect of the military uniform as a marker of whiteness and masculinity: by effacing the physical particularities of their wearers, they equally conceal both skin colour and gender, transforming individualities into a uniform mass of racial and patriarchal dominance (Mulhearn n. pag.).

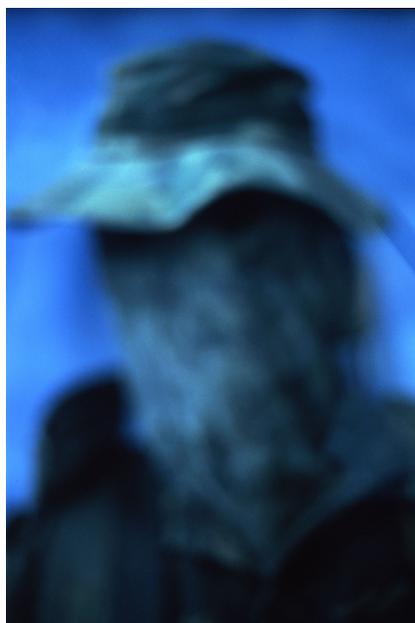


Fig. 5: Hentie van der Merwe, "A Member of 32 Battalion Reconnaissance Wing", Trappings, 2000-2003

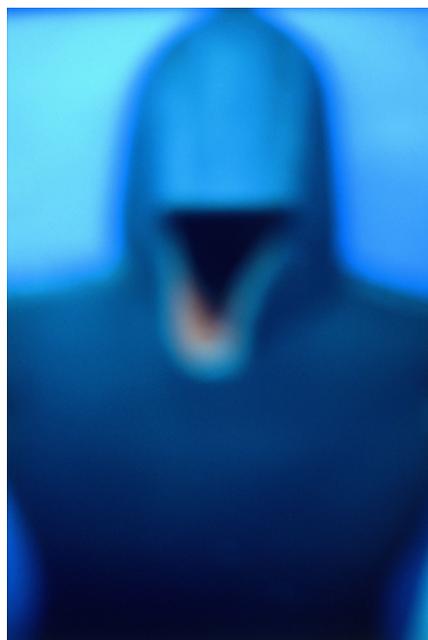


Fig. 6: Hentie van der Merwe, "Wet Suit, World War II", Trappings, 2000-2003

The dynamics between the exposure and concealment of the skin as a marker of race and gender, addressed by Hentie van der Merwe in *Untitled* and the *Trappings* series respectively, ultimately unveil that neither whiteness nor masculinity are entirely what they seem: riddled with paradox, they are abstract concepts seemingly universal but infinitively diverse. Through the blurring of context and content, the artist demystifies the concepts of whiteness, masculinity and sexuality by rendering visible their historical constructed-ness – unstable at their base, they easily crumble when scrutinised too closely and once their normalising invisibility is made visible. The soldier figure central to both works acts as the catalyst for an artistic reflection on the uniformity of white masculinity as an assurance of hegemonic power, not only at the heart of the military, but in a wider social context where ideological racial and gender identities are crucial for the constitution and perpetuation of specific social hierarchies. However, the archive as an artistic medium for the re-articulation of whiteness' and masculinity's historicity promoted at the heart of the apartheid system allows for reinterpretations of those concepts' fixity and becomes a site for contestation, affirmation and even agency.

By challenging historical and positivist assumptions of a naturalised concept associating whiteness with power, masculinity and war, Van der Merwe not only questions the validity of a unified, neutral whiteness from a contemporary point of view, but highlights the malleability of the concept from within the archive. Paradoxically, both strategies of either gridding or blurring the photographs allow the artist at once to homogenise the white male body into a more abstract concept of whiteness, while at the same time integrating the same body into a discourse on difference, transforming it into a site of contestation that reaffirms its particularities regarding race, gender and sexuality.

Both works almost poetically investigate the vulnerability archives are prone to once their context changes. Whiteness as a symbol of power, inscribed into or onto the skin of the able-bodied, white male soldier, becomes unhinged and is put, contrary to Western traditional spectatorship, in front of the scrutinising gaze, encouraging alternative interpretations and different ways of looking. As Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek put it, “there is no ‘true essence’ to ‘whiteness’, there is only the historically contingent constructions of that social location” (91). In this way, Hentie van der Merwe’s work addresses white identities that have been obfuscated by a historical metanarrative, and by incorporating personal experience into a wider discourse on power, the artist successfully opens up a space for a dialogue on race and gender identities in post-apartheid South Africa.

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Bio

Jessica Schons is currently a first-year Ph.D. student in Art History at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Her research focusses on the Archive in contemporary sub-Saharan visual art. She obtained her B.A. from University College Dublin and her M.A. from the Université Catholique de Louvain. Her master thesis *L'art de Willie Doherty et les Troubles en Irlande du Nord: une approche post-documentaire* was published in 2014 at the Editions Universitaires Européennes.

Email : jessica.schons@yahoo.com