



**Andrew Tshabangu**



**Andrew Tshabangu: City in Transition**  
**By Bronwyn Law-Viljoen**

Andrew Tshabangu's "city in transition" is one the photographer sees through the haze of traffic fumes and brazier fires, through the starred glass of shattered windows. It is a city shuffling, lurching, hastening and bargaining its way towards an uneasy truce with the twenty-first century. This body of work suggests that his concern with the ever-shifting social, political and physical landscape of Johannesburg presents itself as observation from the inside and the outside at once. Tshabangu is clearly at home in Johannesburg, familiar with its sidewalks, its combination of the derelict and the burgeoning, its aggressive traffic. He is a documentarian in the classical sense, a recorder of minutiae – he sees the face of an old man come into focus through the fist-sized hole in a factory window – and at the same time an observer of grand-scale shifts in historical, economic and political paradigms. He has, in his lifetime – he was born in Johannesburg in 1966 – seen many of these changes and has recognised that they have nowhere been played out with more drama and energy than in the streets of the city in which he has spent most of his life.



His image of a crowd flowing like water around a concrete pillar emblazoned with the logo of a major bank is at once mundane – these are ordinary people rushing for taxis and trains – and epic. Here is a city in which crowds engulf or are carried forward by the monetary power – the surging and indifferent capitalist energy – suggested by corporate logos, by signs on buildings, indeed by the architectural arrogance of the buildings themselves.

Tshabangu achieves the tension between the story of the everyday and the master narrative by constantly shifting his perspective, while always maintaining a philosophical and literal distance from his subjects. He does the former by alternating between long shots and extreme close-ups, shooting into the distance in some images and snapping what is close at hand in others; and by making plain the juxtaposition of foreground and background, he is constantly drawing attention to his own position in the moment of the photograph. In another image in this body of work – and in a nod to his elder and mentor, Santu Mofokeng – he looks past the sideview mirror of a car to take in a street vendor in the middle ground and the crowded skyline of concrete and billboards in the distance. What gives pause in this image is the reflected image of a towering apartment block in the mirror giving way to a barren

lot littered with rocks, dustbins and, most unlikely of all, chickens.

In order to allude to something larger than the faces in the crowds on the street, Tshabangu often shoots through veils of smoke and glass, or from a slightly elevated position. This has the effect of constructing something around the subjects that his camera takes in, of adding a kind of thinking and filtering process to mere observation. Thus Tshabangu's experience of the city is, as his images and style suggest, multi-layered. On the one hand, his black and white photographs record his contact with small-time vendors, harried taxi operators and cleaning women shuttling their brooms from street to street: he is indeed a commuter like any other. But on the other hand, the impact of his work resides in its presentation of the city as a symbol of something larger than the daily rush and grind of people. His perception is of a city almost cinematic in its pace and movement, reminiscent of Eisenstein or Chaplin but more fragmented, less constructed.

Despite Tshabangu's commitment to the documentary tradition in which he has learned his trade, he has evolved a style that suggests he is just as interested in nuance and the suggestive power of relationships between elements in



a single image as he is in reporting simply what he sees. This can be seen as much in older work as in more recent images. In *Cooked food sellers, Joubert Park* (1995), for example, Tshabangu succeeds in conveying both the facts in the life of a street vendor – the smoky brazier, the rough conditions, the early rising – and the intangible but nonetheless equally real elements of that life. In other words, smoke, haze, the motion of bodies, the leaping of flames in a brazier combine into a shifting narrative of street life, a story that is larger than the facts conveyed by the photographs. “City in Transition” demonstrates this vein in Tshabangu’s work, but at the same time conveys his perception of things having accelerated in the last several years. His scenes of life in the city seem now to have left behind much of the static beauty reminiscent of so-called township artists – the oil painters and watercolourists like Sekoto and Bengu – of the first half of the twentieth century. Tshabangu’s Johannesburg is not a beautiful or romantic city, though it has moments of startling beauty. It is aggressive and gritty, uneasily shouldering its burden of exploding wealth and mass immigration, constantly changing its shape, and never – not for a single moment – at rest.

**Title:** (pages 2 & 3) LOOKING OUTSIDE, 2004

**Title:** (page 5) INSIDE BREE STREET TAXI RANK, 2004

**Title:** (page 8) RAIN ON WINDSHIELD, 2004

**Title:** (page 9) BROKEN WINDOW & RAIL LINES, MANDELA BRIDGE, 2007

**Medium:** Fibre-based print

**Size:** 50cm x 75cm

**Edition:** 10

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Courtesy: The Artist & Gallery MOMO

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