



**Cedric Nunn**



Cedric Nunn's "Blood Relatives"

To be true to Cedric Nunn's artistic vision, one must begin with the story that he wishes to tell. This approach upsets, a little, my usual approach to photography, which is to begin with the images and find out what it is they are trying to say before asking the photographer what he meant by them. But since Nunn suggests that he found himself asking certain questions of himself, his family, and his community before he moved to photographic images as a way to articulate and answer some of these questions, we should, more or less, follow this trajectory.

Or not. The American photographer Duane Michals once remarked that "Photography deals exquisitely with appearances, but nothing is what it appears to be." The issues that Nunn explores are large and important: blood relationships, skin colour, racism, self-hatred, and political cynicism. The photographs themselves are intimate, domestic, and familial. So the question is how to reconcile this insider's view of a family and community with the large themes that Nunn is determined to address. The subtle play of light and shadow, the close portraiture, and the quiet affection of Nunn's images are, it would seem, at odds with this overarching *raison d'être*.

Image: (detail) Detail of Amy Madhlawu Louw's kitchen. She After her second husband died, she was moved from the land which she had occupied and lived on for over thirty years in this modest house, which was filled with character. iVuna 1995



This, I suppose, is precisely the point, and why Michals' remark is particularly apt. The photographs begin with our most natural first point of reference: the people within our immediate circle of acquaintanceship and those places and objects that make up the domestic clutter of our lives. These are stored in the deepest recesses of our minds and yet spring to consciousness at the slightest stimulus: a smell, the sound of a spoon against a cooking pot, a glimpse of a familiar pattern on a curtain or teacup.

Image: (detail) Green girls.  
On the back stoep of the guesthouse built by John Dunn.  
Mangete 1982



So while the thematic thrust of this project is from the outside in – from the political and social fabric of South Africa to the front yard, the hearth, the bedroom – the photographs take as their point of departure relationships of blood, the most fundamental ties of human community that begin with mother and father and extend outward to siblings and cousins, half siblings and second cousins, step siblings and in-laws. Nunn begins in the heart of his own family, circles its daily habits and patterns of life, and observes the turn of heads, the unguarded expressions, the stances and gaits, and the gestures that must be utterly familiar to him.

Nunn inhabits, therefore, the privileged position of the inside observer. It is clear from the points of view presented in many of the photographs in this series, that the photographer is very close, emotionally and literally, to his subjects. He stations himself in a kitchen corner from where he can observe the daily comings and goings of people. He follows his grandmother from the front door, out to the yard to feed the chickens, to the field where she works a hoe in the soil, to her mat in a shaded corner where she rests, to her bed where she crumples in exhaustion. He is deeply mindful of the combination of strength and frailty that her body and face expresses and he waits to find moments in which to capture this quality.

Image: (detail) Myra Dunn. Inhlwati 1993





The image of an aging matriarch lying with her feet drawn up to her chest in a half-foetal position is full of exquisite ironies and poignancy, and it is precisely through such images that Nunn exposes the enormity of the task that he has set himself. How can one hope to understand, confronted with the flesh and blood of this aging woman, with the round of work, rest, childbearing and rearing, cooking and hoeing, bathing and eating that has made up the very fabric of her life, the racial and political anxieties of an entire community of people?

Image: (detail) A bedridden Amy Madhlawu Louw. iVuna 1996



The problem, then, at the heart of Nunn's project, a problem of which he is acutely aware, is how to find one's way from a set of values and beliefs – about identity, about the nature of society and the individual's place in it – deeply embedded in a whole community of people, through all of the social and political ramifications of those values, to the individual habits, alliances, emotions, and daily patterns of living of particular individuals. Or the other way around. How, in other words, do you understand one in terms of the other: the social and public in light of the individual and private?

Nunn partly answers this question by alternating scenes in private homes with photographs of public ceremonies in which an element of performance, of a sense of the public persona interacting with an audience, is at play. In both of these kinds of images, Nunn draws attention to small details and unguarded gestures. There is something moving, for example, in the picture of Ernest Dunn, MP, seated in his office, the old South African flag planted firmly in the middle of the desk, a pen in the right hand, and in the corner a brown paper lunch bag. But contemplate for a moment the possible complications between this man and his now disowned son, shown leaning forward in his leather chair, his old t-shirt bagging at the neck, and our focus on the small, private details gives way to our consideration of the larger issues at hand.

Image: (detail) Ernest Dunn, then House of Representatives MP for Northern Natal, Tri-cameral government. Mangete 1986



Nunn leads us through a series of moments, private and public, forcing us to stop at each one in order to contemplate both its singular impact and its relation to the moments just before and just after it: the young man lounging against a wall is linked, Nunn reminds us, to the speechmakers and celebrators of genealogy and racial purity. The child with the shock of blond hair is connected, through a complex series of blood and community relationships, to the man in a labourer's cap or the boys on their way to school, and all are caught inside the chalk circle of the final image in this series, and stand in some relation to the graffitied words in that same shot, "National Youth Day June 16."



Image: (detail) Detail of Ronny Louw's Room. iVuna 2001.



The documenting instinct aside, Nunn's most powerful images are interior, domestic scenes. In these we see the photographer contemplating the ways in which light, shadow, and movement convey not just the mood of a photographic moment, but of a photographic enquiry. These images are full of the questions that Nunn is asking himself at every turn. They convey his powerful ties to a community of people, his deep affection for his subjects, and his sense that the faces and gestures will reveal some truth about the world. At the same time, his framing of certain shots suggests Nunn's awareness that far more eloquent even than the faces of his subjects, are the shadows between them, the things half-glimpsed through a glass door, and the silences around a kitchen table. These intangibles are what "Blood Relatives" begins and ends with.

Photography Speaks: 150 Photographers on Their Art.  
New York: Aperture, 2004, p. 246.



Image: (detail) Amy Madhlawu Louw and neighbour MaQwabe Khumalo.  
As her once servant, MaQwabe would only ever stand or sit on the floor  
when in the house. iVuna 1999





Image: (detail) Amy Madhlawu  
Louw and neighbour  
MaQwabe Khumalo.

Most of her neighbours  
came to the area  
as her servants,  
and a strict protocol  
was observed in which  
deference was shown to her  
throughout her life.  
iVuna 1988



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Image: (detail) Amy Madhlawu  
Louw returning home from her  
fields. She continued to work in  
her fields well into her nineties  
iVuna 1988

- ⊕ - Graskop
- ⊕ - Dullstroom
- ⊕ - Pretoria - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Irene - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Richmond
- ⊕ - Cape Town