

An Inside View

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We fly over the african continent amazed at the burgeoning, sprawling mega-cities, the vast expanses of rural lands, meandering rivers weaving through, snake-like in their watery volume. Vast stretches of desert and further south the wondrous grasslands and the knowledge of herds of wildlife, the sight of birds in flight. The airport arrival is but an interlude to the pleasure of finally experiencing the mediated idea of Africa, the drive to the holiday resort, to friends, to the workplace negotiated elsewhere. The continent is so very often welcoming, embracing. The people smile and one's luggage is carried with vigor and a certain degree of swagger. Outside, the pictures latent in us all await us in an onrush of received prejudices.

Few, if any, really try to access the insider's view, how we really see, experience ourselves. Many factors complicate the matter, not least of which is the vexed question of who is really an outsider, who an insider. Is it essentially an issue of national identity or rather one of economic empathy? Does one's skin color include or exclude? One's religion, one's very conscious identity? How long does one have to be there to be considered an insider, an outsider?

Photographically, the dichotomy appears somehow simpler. Too many outsiders have depicted the continent within the narrow viewpoint of their inherent prejudices. Africa and Africans as the backdrop for images of the exotic other, of wildlife in cages and zoos at home, but, here, roaming free. Lately, images of destruction and warfare, of catastrophes, of unbearable diseases and of the seeming incapacity of Africans to place themselves in the turbulent wind of post-industrial development. Inside, the view is much more subtle and nuanced.

The South African Jodi Bieber investigates the very contested space of personal beauty. Who am I and what do I choose to present to the outside. Modern marketing demands a conformity that so often goes against the grain of personal wants and feelings. The blatant domination of certain norms that distort and pervert, leading to all kinds of anomalies. Skin lighteners advertised as blemish removers, as enhancers of the facial image.

Sabelo Mlangeni, also from South Africa, looks into the same contested space but from another angle, that of personal sexuality. His images of young transsexuals is unusual in that they live in the countryside and not in the cities that allow for protecting anonymity. Sabelo empathizes with and gives us a view of a reality many do not even want to acknowledge, even less tolerate.