



Born free: portraits of Rwandan and South African children after 1994

Award-winning photographer Pieter Hugo's new project captures the young faces born in the aftermath of genocide and apartheid

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The photographer explains the portraits were styled and staged by the children themselves. Photograph: Pieter Hugo/Stevenson Gallery

In the spring of 1994, a young Pieter Hugo was sitting at his parent's house in Johannesburg watching TV as news of the Rwandan genocide unfolded. He was transfixed, he says, but the situation developing around him was just as historic.

South Africa was just about to hold its [first democratic elections](#), marking the end of decades of white minority rule under apartheid. "Overnight we went from a police state to a free state. The oppressive systems of control were gone and there was an anarchic period before the new ones replaced them," the award-winning photographer recalls.

Profoundly affected by the events of that year, Hugo travelled to Rwanda many times over the next two decades [documenting the aftermath of the genocide](#). But it wasn't until 2014, on assignment for The Hague, that he started taking portraits of children, [now being exhibited for the first time](#) at Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town.

Hugo explains: "The shoots invariably happened at school buildings. [I was there] during the Rwandan school holidays, there were always kids hanging around outside the building, curious and fascinated by what we were doing. I made one or two portraits of the kids, mainly to get them to stop hassling me."

"When I got back to my studio and had a proper look at the images I realised that the portraits of the kids were much more interesting than the pictures I made on assignment."

He saw the images as a way to understand this momentous period in African history through the eyes of the young people born in the shadow of violence and transformation.

Hugo sees the portraits as a collaborations with his young subjects

Hugo has much much of his work as a direct response to images of Africa prevalent in the mainstream media. Photograph: Pieter Hugo/Stevenson Gallery

The photographs became a way for Hugo to work through the psychological impact of 1994. Unlike his own generation, the children “are not carrying the same baggage of history as you are,” he says.

“I see it in [South Africa](#) with kids that were born after 1994 – they don’t carry the same burdens as their parents, and their engagement with the world I find very liberating.”

‘I learnt that you can’t force emotion out of a child. They have a real honest energy.’
Photograph: Pieter Hugo/Stevenson Gallery

Hugo says he sees the portraits – some of which were staged and styled by the children themselves – as a collaborations with his young subjects, and decided to keep them anonymous because they “embody a larger concept than the individual,” he says.

However, it wasn’t always an easy process. “It was very laborious. [Children](#) are very easy to shoot in some ways, but I also learnt that you can’t force emotion out of a child. They have a real honest energy,” he says. He chose to keep his subjects anonymous, because they “embody a larger concept than the individual,” he says.

‘Kids that were born after 1994 – they don’t carry the same burdens as their parents’
Photograph: Pieter Hugo/Stevenson Gallery

Loaded landscapes

The contested rural landscape depicted in the photographs plays a salient role.

“In [Rwanda](#) the genocide happened everywhere. It’s something you’re acutely aware of when you’re there. You’d go for a swim in the lake, and you know you’ve seen pictures of it with hundreds of bodies floating in it. It’s on every street corner, every plantation. The landscape is loaded,” Hugo explains.

In South [Africa](#), the surroundings are equally problematic. “To whom does the land belong? Where do you draw these lines? Where does ownership begin and end? These are difficult questions, and I don’t have any clear answers.”

Previously, Hugo made his work as a direct response to images of Africa prevalent in the mainstream media: rather than showing African bodies in crisis, depicting suffering, war, famine and poverty, Hugo has sought to portray a more complex vision through his work. He’s best known for his series of Nigerian men [posing with chained hyenas](#), which won him a World Press Photo award in 2005.

“I’m very aware that it’s easy to fall into an afro-pessimist view, the paradigm of famine, war – all the usual clichés. But at the same time, you have to be realistic: a million people lost their lives in 100 days in Rwanda. You can’t just have some revisionist view.”

With tenuous diplomatic relations between Rwanda and South Africa, and prevalent political corruption present in both countries, how does Hugo, a father of two young children, feel about future? “I try to stay optimistic,” he says. “I take it day by day.”

[1994 is on show at Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town until the 16 July](#)