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SAN ANTONIO CURRENT | 9/17/2008

Print

Art

A different, and deadly apartheid

SA photog brings South African AIDS crisis home

by Johnston Farrow



courtesy

"A Good Day": Red Baklava's photo of three South African children, singing after being given new United Colors of Benetton T-shirts.

While it's a series of images that could be deemed photojournalism, the power and poignancy of Red Baklava's *The Road to Patrick Chamusso* exhibition at the One9Zero6 stays with you long after you've left the gallery. The exhibit centers on its title subject, the South African freedom fighter once jailed with Nelson Mandela in the anti-apartheid struggles, and recently lionized in the film *Catch a Fire*, starring Tim Robbins and Derek Luke. Chamusso went on to open the Two Sisters orphanage, which houses 150 children affected by the African HIV/AIDS epidemic. Even without the backstory, *The Road* is a beautiful metaphor of courage and responsibility.

Shot in digital, the sharply focused visuals of Baklava's images allow for maximum impact. Much of the exhibit concentrates on scenes from the South African orphanage, with the resident children telling most of the story.

Chamusso is the pillar for these children and, consequently, is the centerpiece of some of the more striking images. Baklava chose to shoot the majority of these photos in black-and-white, and in doing so, draws stark emotion from his perspective. The best of them is "Ordinary Man," a moving, haunting picture of Chamusso's hands: Big, worn, and interconnected, they tell us much about the man and his history of sacrifice and, ultimately, redemption.

Although many of the photographs are of children, most exude experience beyond their years. "Miles Away" focuses on a young girl surrounded by others her age, her gaze somewhere other than her immediate surroundings. What is her story? How did she get there? Whatever her answers, they aren't easy.

"Find Me Lord," a picture of a boy praying before class, makes the dreams of another life palpable. These photographs show how much these individuals have lived, those they have left behind, the toils and hardships ahead. Yet the innocence of childhood breaks through in several pieces. "Me First" and "A Good Day" show the curiosity and playfulness that comes with being kids, despite their circumstances.

While many of the photos are black and white, some are deliberately shot in color in order to bring out the vibrancy of the characters. The overly saturated "Mountain Secret" shows Chamusso weary yet steadfast in his work, a larger-than-life personality magnified against a mountain backdrop.

The second half of the exhibit features the stop Baklava made on his way to South Africa, in Tokyo. These include scenes of the city's crowded, chaotic population contrasted with an underlying organization, something the pieces suggest has been maintained for generations.

“Temple Text” is a picture of a religious passage laid on a wooden set piece, the clean lines and angles of which can be seen throughout the rest of the Tokyo portion of the exhibit against a largely urban(e) backdrop. The sharp angles are once again found in “6:30 p.m.,” in the uniformity of the crowds in “12:07 p.m.,” while “10:19 p.m.,” presents a busy intersection filled with people and traffic, set in near-perfect, mechanical motion.

The photographer presents a marked contrast between the two societies: Tokyo is ordered, structured, anonymous; South Africa is less structured, but animated, passionate, communal.

The entire exhibit speaks volumes of good curation. The pieces flow logically into a coherent story, one that begins with struggle and sorrow, moves into strength of will, ending finally with hope. If the show has a weakness, it’s that the Tokyo portion feels as though it could be a separate exhibit; it’s almost overtaken by the message of the South African series. That said, juxtaposing the two makes *The Road to Patrick Chamusso* an interesting study in sociological variation.

Baklava is a rising star in the world of photography, with his work published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times*. A native of San Antonio, he began working with Chamusso after writing an article on him for the South African Airways in-flight magazine. He subsequently shot the Two Sisters orphanage as part of a fundraising campaign for D4K (Dancing 4 Kids), a Japanese-based organization aimed at helping children around the world. Baklava’s show is set to open in both Tokyo and South Africa after its FOTOSEPTIEMBRE debut. •

FOTOSEPTIEMBRE

The Road to Patrick Chamusso

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Through Oct 3

Free

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A portion of the sales will be donated to the Two Sisters orphanage.