



Untitled 2004 chromogenic print

# **Born in South Africa, 1960. Lives and works in Cape Town.**

Zwelethu Mthethwa's large-scale, richly colored photographic portraits of South African laborers and residents of the Paarl shantytown near Cape Town evidence their subjects' hard work and impoverished lives in vivid detail. But the figures' confident stance and self-determined presentation emphasize the strength of their character over their economic circumstances. Images of Africans as hungry, violent, and diseased are all too common, and Mthethwa has intentionally set out to counteract negative portrayals of his country and continent. Instead of taking pictures that illustrate a tragic story or political purpose, the artist works in collaboration with the people and communities he photographs to allow them to dictate the terms by which they wish to be seen. "I do not believe poverty is equal to degradation," the artist has asserted. "I think . . . [my] photographs preserve and show a humane-ness of the occupants in their private spaces. They restore their pride and affirm their ownership."<sup>1</sup>

Mthethwa was born in 1960 into apartheid South Africa. Like many successful black South African artists of his generation, he took a circuitous path of chance and circumstance to become a professional photographer. As a teenager, he attended the South African Institute

of Race Relations' Abangani Open School in Durban, which was one of the few schools where blacks could take fine arts courses. His tutors encouraged him to apply to the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town to get the best education, but black students could not attend unless they wanted to study a subject that was unavailable at black universities. Mthethwa applied to the Michaelis because photography was only taught there. After graduating, he received a Fulbright Scholarship to pursue a master's degree in imaging arts at the Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, which he received in 1989. In 1994, he was appointed one of the first black lecturers at his South African alma mater, and in 1999, he left teaching to devote himself full time to his artwork.

In the artist's first major photographic series, images of interior scenes from 2000 and sugarcane workers from 2004, Mthethwa used two visual strategies to "restore respect and dignity" to his subjects—a large format and bright colors.<sup>2</sup> The image size allows for an incredible amount of detail. It is possible to read the newspapers decorating the houses, see every clean cut on the reeds of sugarcane, and observe the wrinkles and calluses on the protagonists' skin. In the manner of a photojournalist, the artist tells a story with these minutiae,

but he presents them on a large scale like a painter of the eighteenth-century French salon. As with neoclassical paintings, the scale of the photographs connotes importance and power reserved in the Western tradition for royalty and the very wealthy. Vibrant pigments have a similarly dignified connotation for Mthethwa and are a distinctive characteristic of his art. For him, vivid colors signify a uniquely African aesthetic but also, metaphorically, a rich and energetic life. The formal qualities of the artist's work therefore perfectly complement his political message. Like other prominent fine-art photographers thriving around the Cape Town area, including Guy Tillim and Tracey Derrick, Mthethwa is following the dream laid out in his childhood by the anti-apartheid and Pan-African movements to reclaim African self-images in the face of oppression and degradation.

## **RH**

1. Zwelethu Mthethwa, interview with Bongi Dhlomo, "Zwelethu Mthethwa Talks about His Photographs," in Frank Herremans, ed., *Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art from South Africa*, exh. cat., The Museum for African Art, New York (New York: Prestel, 1999), 75.

2. Zwelethu Mthethwa, in Ashraf Jamal, "A feature on an artist in the public eye: Zwelethu Mthethwa," *Art Throb*, <http://www.artthrob.co.za/99apr/artbio.htm>.