

Photographer documents SA's youth carving out their own anti-born-free identities

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Striking images of young people carving their own post-apartheid, anti-born-free identities.

Image: Musa N Nxumalo

For just over a decade Soweto-born photographer Musa N Nxumalo has been documenting the social lives of black youth in Johannesburg.

Nxumalo is a participant in the subculture of the young black, alternative, rock kids he documents and *16 Shots*, his second solo show with the Smac Gallery, links the social scenes of nightclubs and parties with the recent events of the Fees Must Fall protests.

Out of the shadows of the darkness of the clubs emerge striking images of young people carving their own post-apartheid, anti-born-free identities in a world that's increasingly been called to account for its lack of delivery on the promises made to the children of the "rainbow nation."

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Two men hold aloft aerosol cans spraying fire in "This is how you start a party!" their raised arms echoing the raised fist of a protester in the image "Isgxagxa 1."

A birdcage in a corner holding a plastic pig's head and a rubber penis in "The major key!" contrasts with an image of an old TV set atop a table in "The death of the revolution!"

Each of these images, while shedding light on the world of Nxumalo's subjects, also bears the ghostly, unseen presence of the photographer himself, standing in the club peering through his shutter, capturing these moments or looking for the mirrors between

the party and the protest as he takes in the chaos of the fees protests at the Union Buildings.

Referencing the title of a song by Chicago rapper Vince Mensa and the shooting of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald in Chicago in 2014, Nxumalo also links the lives of black youth and their fight in South Africa with the struggles of their American counterparts in their struggles with police.

Images of objects such as the birdcage, the television and a moonlike disco ball provide contemplative space in the midst of the rowdy, desperate but also life-affirming movements of party-goers and protesters. As critic Percy Mabandu notes in his accompanying exhibition essay - the "touch of life in Nxumalo's pictures projects a collectivity onto the singular subjects of his portraits that presents them as one among many. Never alone, theirs is a shared generational narrative."

Their story as presented in Nxumalo's photographs is one of hope and hopelessness, sometimes exuberantly restless and at others despairingly watchful but never without a continuous forward motion towards the possibilities and the challenges of what lies ahead.

- *16 Shots by Musa N Nxumalo is at [Smac Gallery](#) Johannesburg until May 29.*
- *This article was originally published in [The Times](#).*

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