

Sabelo Mlangeni

"I have stopped time" A Family Portrait

curated by Francesca de' Medici

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«When capturing a moment with a camera, something gains visibility that was invisible until that time. It's there, but not there. So what does it mean as a photographer, if you capture such an image and you bring it home? It means that it's an image that didn't expect to be seen, because it's not in your eyes but it's in your lens. These images were responding to my presence there.»
Sabelo Mlangeni, in conversation with Francesca de' Medici, Johannesburg 2025

Sabelo Mlangeni is an image whisperer. Someone with an open heart and soul who captures moments, be they a long wished for revelation or a gift of chance. Being so open to the fleeting and transient fills the temporal space between past and future, morphing the eternal into the now. His projects, invariably prepared with care and regard, profoundly understand the sacrality of being present in the *hic et nunc* as much as remaining wide open to the gift of the moment — and in either case effectively stopping Time.

Mlangeni's relationship with photography is spiritual, almost devotional. To each their walk of life, and his chosen path is not just of the observer, but of the witness. His commitment is deep-rooted, driven by a passionate and long-standing interest in the origins and meaning of chosen community, and in queer, rural everyday life. This brings him to share the quotidian and commonplace with the Invisible, aka the queer and discriminated communities. Time spent with them is precious beyond measure as Sabelo communes with those he wishes to witness and celebrate through his photography for weeks, often months. This immersion is a practice of deep devotion, empathy and love; by being welcomed into these communities he absorbs their beauty and joys as much as their challenges and strife.

The images presented in *"I have stopped time" A Family Portrait* stem from a 2017 residency in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo. Upon seeing them for the first time, bell hooks's epigrammatic *"the first act of violence that patriarchy asks men to commit is against themselves, to kill off the emotional parts of themselves"* sprung in my mind. Mlangeni visited queer and rural communities in DRC in the fervent and regardful hope of capturing *Umoya*, the isiZulu and Bantu expression for the spirit and essence of a person: their true inner being. In directing his lens towards those who refuse to suppress their emotions or vulnerability, Sabelo participates in an act of collective healing and an ancestral, holistic perception of life. His practice permeated as it is with *Ukulinda*, of the being still in the moment, he awaits the perfectly imperfect capture with tenderness and respect, thus gifting us with deeply engaging images and a spiritual encouragement to accept the emotional connections his photographs foster.

When thinking of Mlangeni's path, another favourite quote by the beloved bell hooks rings in: *"The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is – it's to imagine what is possible"*. An acute observer and an empathetic, refined storyteller, Mlangeni explores the multiple layers of marginality to celebrate those whose existence walks on a liminal tightrope between discrimination and struggle, and acceptance and safety. Sabelo's sophisticated and compelling photography invites us to participate and partake in what are fixed, immovable moments in time ... but also to take a step further and imagine what lies waiting in the realm of the kind, tender, peaceful, and the possible.

Francesca de' Medici

Sabelo Mlangeni (Driefontein, Mpumalanga, ZA, 1980) lives and works in Johannesburg. He graduated from the Market Photo Workshop, Johannesburg in 2004. Recent and upcoming solo exhibitions include: 2026 - ADA, curated by Francesca de' Medici, Rome, IT. 2025 - blank projects, Cape Town, ZA. 2023 - Cantor Arts Center, Stanford, US; Institute of Ideas & Imagination, Paris, FR. 2022 - Huis Marseille, Amsterdam, NL. 2021 - blank projects, Cape Town, ZA. 2018 - Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg, ZA.

Recent group exhibitions include: 2025 - MoMA, New York, US; MASP, curated by Adriano Pedrosa, São Paulo, BR; Norval Foundation, Cape Town, ZA. 2024 - Biennale Arte, 60th International Art Exhibition, curated by Adriano Pedrosa, Venice, IT; The Art Institute of Chicago, curated by Antawan I. Byrd, US; Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden, DE; Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation, curated by Anne-Marie Beckmann, Mariama Attah, Eschborn, DE; Museum Folkwang, Essen, DE. 2023 - Tate Modern, curated by Osei Bonsu, London, UK; A4 Arts Foundation, curated by Khanya Mashabela, Cape Town, ZA; Haus der Kunst / The Walther Collection, curated by Anna Schneider, Hanns Lennart Wiesner, Munich, DE. 2022 - Para Site, curated by Nomaduma Rosa Masilela, Thiago de Paula Souza, Hong Kong, CN; Huis Marseille, Amsterdam, NL; K21, Düsseldorf, DE. 2021 - Palais de Tokyo, curated by Marie-Ann Yemsi, Paris, FR; Frestas Triennial of São Paulo, curated by B. Lemos, D. Lima, T. de Paula Souza, BR. 2019 - Lagos Biennale, curated by A. I. Byrd, O. Fakeye, T. Oshinowo, Nigeria, NG; Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, curated by L. Ossei-Mensah, J. Lynne, J. Ginsburg, US; Huis Marseille, Amsterdam, NL. 2018 - SAVVY Contemporary, curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Berlin, DE; Kunsthall KAdE, curated by Nkule Mabaso, Manon Braat, Amersfoort, NL. 2015 - Museum Africa, curated by Okwui Enwezor, Johannesburg, ZA. 2013 - Liverpool Biennal, curated by Lorenzo Fusi, UK.

Among his residencies: Amant, New York (2025), A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town (2018), Centre de Art Waza, Lubumbashi (2017), Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm (2017), Akademie der Künste, Vienna (2014), Akademie der Künste, Berlin (2013) and Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos (2010).

Mlangeni has been awarded several prizes, including: the Columbia University II & I fellowship and artist residency, Paris in 2022, the Africa MediaWorks Photography Prize, London in 2018, the POPCAP16 Prize for Contemporary African Photography in 2016 and the Tollman Award for Visual Arts, South Africa in 2009. His work is part of several institutional collections, including: Museum of Art of São Paulo, BR; Tate Modern, London, UK; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, US; Johannesburg Art Gallery, ZA; Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm, DE; The Art Institute of Chicago, US; KADIST, Paris, FR; CNAP - French national collections, Paris, FR.