

A life lived through the lens



‘Golden Bird Farm, Oudtshoorn. The Veldman family home.’

Pictures and captions: JUHAN KUUS



‘Willem van Staden, a pensioner who was a farm labourer, walks past his house on the farm of Piet Schoeman on the road to the Cango Caves. He is taking a gaffel [pitchfork] to remove thorn bushes from the perimeter of his garden. The farmer (one of the decent ones) has given him a piece of land to farm on. November 1 2003’



‘Family on one of the Jonker farms. Running water, electricity, TV, the works. The one thing that I did find in Oudtshoorn was that in homes where one found religious icons, things were well with the family. In this case, however, the man was a little drunk. It was the weekend. Only a little drunk and a little sad. The eyes of the child. There is a lot of foetal alcohol syndrome in the Klein Karoo. A school just for these damaged kids at Dysseisdorp’

The stark, harrowing nature of Juhan Kuus’s photographs has left him homeless and without a camera. But that will not stop him shooting, writes **Oliver Roberts**

JUHAN Kuus has been an emotionally broken man for a very long time, but a year ago his bones started breaking too.

In a series of events that seem typical of his life so far, Kuus shattered his knee after tripping over a tree root one dark, drizzly morning in Cape Town. Months later, when his knee had nearly recovered, the joint gave way and he fell and broke his hip and shoulder.

Both times, Kuus was walking the streets with his camera, looking for something — anything — to capture. Kuus has to take photographs. Not to make a living — he reckons less than 5% of the work he has done over the past decade or so has been published — but because if he does not take photographs he does not really exist.

“People have never understood the need for the expression of the voice that must come out,” he once wrote. “The photography that I do is an outer expression brought to light of what it is that is my soul. This is true. The reason of why I do what I must I have never really understood. My only excuse is that I must. I do not know why. All I know is I must.”

He is 60 now and lives in Cape Town in a shelter for the elderly.



OBSESSED: Juhan Kuus in better days, with a camera around his neck as always

He is a photographer — that is all he is, ever was and always will be — but he no longer owns a camera.

In the past there has been steady work at newspapers and photo agencies, even the odd award, but all that got in the way of the act of looking through a viewfinder and distilling himself into what was there. So he left those jobs and committed himself wholly to documenting the lives of the poor and the downtrodden, the drunken and the violent and the dead.

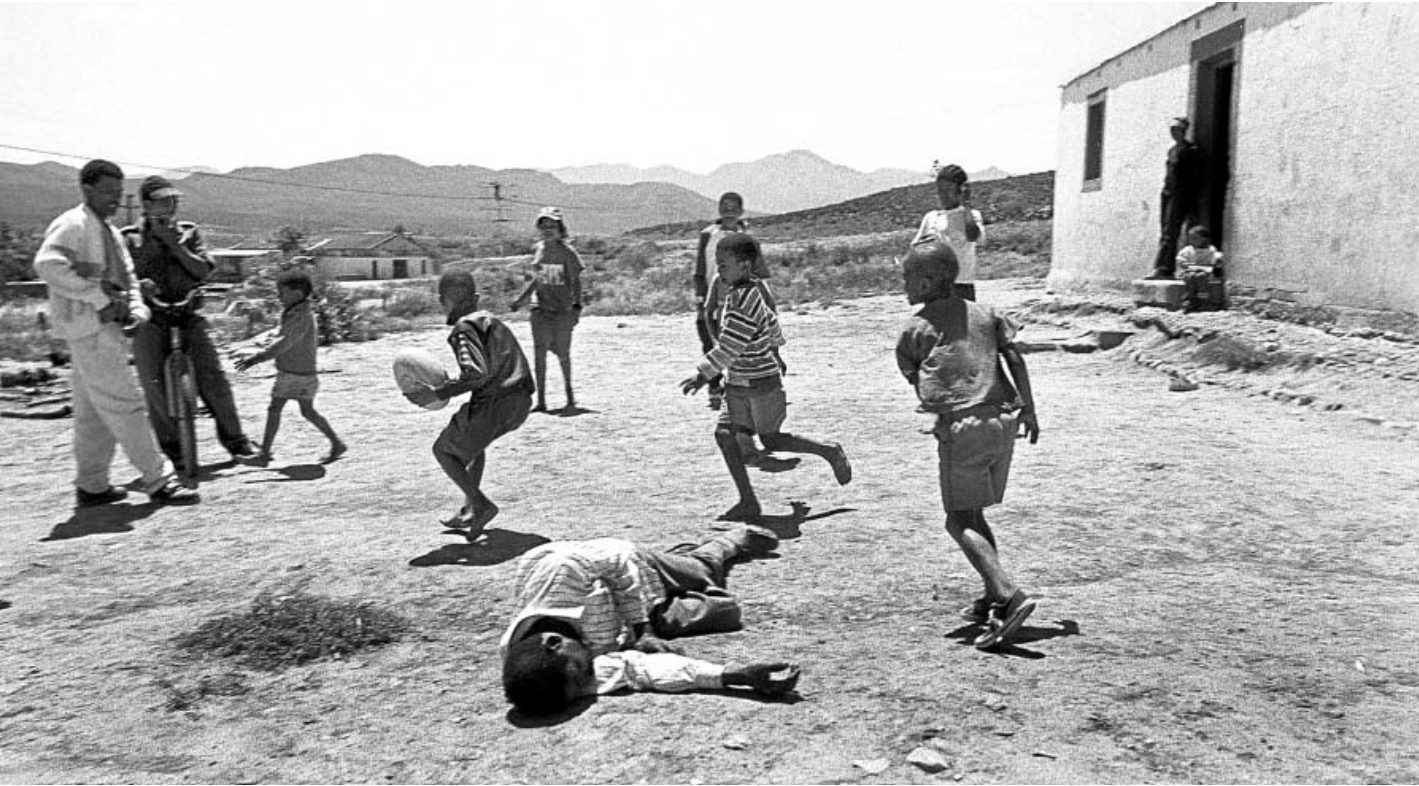
There were some cameras,

Leicas, but he had to sell them one by one so he could eat and continue the work. Now there are none left, and what he feels he must do he no longer can.

“It’s a high price to pay, but it’s worth it. It’s worth it,” he says. “I can assure you that I like red wine and I enjoy steak, but look, let’s be honest, these days, the sort of work that I’ve done, nobody wants to publish it anymore. It makes me profoundly depressed, but it’s the price you pay.”

Kuus is sitting next to a large second-storey window. Grey smoke from his cigarette drifts out and the sun comes in, bleaching his features.

We are in the Cape Town studio of Gavin Furlonger, who heads the Photographic Archival and Preservation Association. Furlonger discovered Kuus about five years ago after unearthing his photographs, letters and journals while archiving the work of another photographer, the late James Soullier. Furlonger tracked Kuus down and has been looking after his interests ever since. This includes retrieving all the work he did for French agency Sipa Press, trying to get him exhibitions and, recently, lending him a camera. But it is not easy. Kuus has often been his own worst enemy.



‘Weekend drunks. Farm northeast of Oudtshoorn. The adults were inside drinking rotgut wine. The kids were outside playing rugby. A drunk stumbled out of the house and demanded to play as well. He lasted about five minutes and passed out dead drunk. The kids left him alone. It did not seem to bother them. They have seen plenty of drunks before. They just continued the game and played on and around the dead drunk man. 2003’

“Juhan is well known by those in the field. Even the Bang-Bang guys found him more hardcore than they were,” Furlonger says. “But he’s quite a complex character, and he’s certainly not the most positive person in

terms of himself, his work and otherwise. He has always had a propensity to shoot the dark and the harrowing — it’s certainly not the type of work you want on your walls — but in among all that are some beautiful, calm,

lasting moments. Another thing is that he hasn’t endeared himself to those people that would otherwise keep the history books in shape.”

Furlonger’s comments only provide further fuel for Kuus’s

belief that people, generally, do not care any more.

“When I look through my work, I’ve come to the conclusion that times have changed,” Kuus says. “All I’m doing is being reactive. I’ve just been

documenting what life is like in my time and it’s . . . it’s not nice. It’s all about me, me, me, us, us, us.”

Sometimes, while he is talking, while he is making a point about the fraying of civilisation, Kuus squeezes his eyes shut beneath his bifocals and keeps them that way for a few seconds. It could be some sort of tic, but it is more likely the strain he feels about the state of the world. It must be a facial gesture he has performed an infinite number of times — his whole face is lined with it.

“People are all about deception these days,” he continues. “We have masks. We cloak ourselves in perceptions. We’re not real any more. Take the people I shoot — there are no deceptions. What you see is what you get. These are real people, even the drunks.”

“But go into the city and it’s all about perceptions. It’s all about bullshit. It’s all about ‘f*** the neighbourhood’.”

He goes off on vehement, misanthropic, blasphemous soliloquies like this all the time. When I ask him whether he has always been this way, he says no. He can mark the day, in 1974, when he changed, when he saw with new eyes. A young black boy, after stealing some coal off the railway tracks, was caught by the engine drivers and taken on board, where his backside was forced into the fire. Kuus witnessed all this and testified

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'The Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees. Apart from the music and the stage shows, a blind farmworker's wife begs for some small change. The KKNK, the biggest cultural festival in the country, is held at Oudtshoorn in the Western Cape every year. In 2006 it was the 13th such event, and it had to my mind degenerated into a cheap flea market where the Afrikaner was still searching for his/her identity. I did not notice people from the farms — and the coloured folk that did attend did so over the weekend, mainly the Saturday, and I suspect that they were from Oudtshoorn's Bridgton coloured township. Also many black people from the north of South Africa were out in full force, either walking around or at static stalls selling every type of junk from plastic toy cellphones to clothing. Food stalls were aplenty and prices at the centre of the festival were 30%-plus higher than at any other place'

Down and out in black and white

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in court, where the boy's scar tissue, extending halfway down his thighs, was displayed as evidence.

"That's when I woke up a bit. That was the first jolt," Kuus says. He was a police reservist for a time too, saw some pretty horrible stuff.

When you spend an hour or two with Kuus, you see that his images are exactly that "outer expression brought to light of what it is that is my soul".

They are grainy, monochrome monuments to the living dead. Gangsters. Prostitutes. Drunks. Parents grieving for a child killed by a stray bullet. Grubby children. Mangy dogs.

"Human nature is predatory," says Kuus. He is tall and thin and his white shirt droops loosely about his neck. He smokes and smokes and smokes and rubs the

top of his forehead with his middle finger as if he is in pain but does not want to tell you.

We are sorting through his photographs now. He is describing them. Man chained to a tree: "Wow. Crazy sh**." Funeral for slain child: "Look at that face, look at that humble hat." Gangster: "Look at that son of a bitch." Another funeral: "Look at the rain coming down. Look at that old woman there." Prostitutes: "Look at this darling — pimp, lady of the night. Look at the flies, look at the injuries, look at the bruise on her boobs." Gangster gun fight: "He runs into his room to reload his .357 Magnum and the wife is there. Look at her — she's defeated. 'What the f*** is my man doing? Why?'"

Why indeed. I ask him why the cycles of violence and despair. I ask him again and again and again until he explodes.

"All these questions you ask, I

haven't got any answers," he shouts. "I'm as f***** up as my victims, right? And I don't have any answers."

Kuus is not an artist. Call him that, dare to compare his grim, heavy images with those of Diane Arbus, Don McCullin, Eugene Smith or Eugene Richards, and he erupts once more and says you are not listening to him.

"My work is not art, it's a f***** photograph," he says, eyes pinched. "No, no. Sorry, it's just what I believe in. I don't believe in God and I don't believe my photography is art, but you can call me what the f*** you like."

Picture of another funeral: "Look at that poor, poor man. Look at the anguish." Picture of a man in the Cape Flats cutting the tail off a live dog: "When I asked him why he was doing that, he said 'I was born to'. I

grabbed him and — though I'm not too violent — I knocked him against a van a couple of times."

We have not evolved, says Kuus. "We're still terribly, terribly primitive."

Then we come to a series of photos he took of Cuban doctors working in the townships. There is one of a birth. The baby is screaming, covered in blood and fluid, but in the corner of the picture is the mother's face, her eyes shimmering with joy and love. Kuus says that was one of the best days of his life. One of the best, he says. Then he sighs and his shirt hangs more loosely across his back.

"It's a wonderful, beautiful world," he says, looking out the window to the street below. "Sure, some days are going to be a bust. Some months are going to be a bust. Hell, some years are going to be a bust. But you come back and you go at it again."