

# THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER

Young South African artist Tsoku Maela used beautiful, emotionally raw photographs to tell the story of his mental health struggles with naked honesty. Their success means the observer has become the observed and this rising star of the photographic arts must now learn to love the attention and, most importantly, finds *Selena Schleh*, love himself



In the beautiful, surreal and melancholic images of South African photographer Tsoku Maela, people hide from the world. Heads are obscured by plumes of smoke or swathed in bandages; in one striking image, a man is captured in the act of painting his face, literally whitewashing himself out of the frame. Maela only burst onto the global scene last year with the series *Abstract Peaces*, inspired by his struggle with depression and, for a young photographer unused to the spotlight, exposing these intensely personal issues to the glare of public scrutiny doesn't come easily, it seems. "I'm more of a wallflower, a people watcher - people shouldn't know I'm there," is how the artist describes his approach.

He has always been a keen observer, but those observations were initially expressed through poetry. He bought his first camera while studying for a BA in motion picture at Cape Town's AFDA, majoring in screenwriting, but was put off by the technicalities ("camera people speak a funny language") and didn't pick it up again until three years later, when a mysterious - and to this day still unexplained - medical condition landed him in hospital. "My time in there proved

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to be pivotal," he remembers. "I questioned myself every day: my purpose, the ways to spread the stories I wanted to share so badly with the world."

Leaving hospital "broke and friendless", he took his first self-portrait - "me, looking into the light, resting, peaceful" - and has been shooting every day since: "I realised that what can be written could be photographed."

One of the first stories Maela chose to tell with his camera was

his lonely struggle with anxiety and depression. Growing up in the small township of Lebowakgomo, Maela found it impossible to open up to his parents - a policeman and a teacher - due to the cultural stigma surrounding mental health in South Africa. Instead, he decided to represent the battle between himself and his mind visually. The result was the surreal, metaphorical photo series *Abstract Peaces*, in which Maela is besieged by circling sharks and umbrellas falling from the sky.

A personally cathartic process ("I'm grateful for art as rehabilitation. Medication just left me numb.") *Abstract Peaces* also struck a chord with African communities around the world. Thousands of empathetic messages poured in after Maela shared the images on Tumblr. One man, intent on suicide, changed his mind after seeing the image *Rage. Regret. Return.*

But becoming a poster boy for mental health brought challenges for the photographer. "For the first time

in my life, I felt like people were actually looking at me or in my direction, which sort of disrupts my wallflower approach. I can't really make art when I know it has a high chance of becoming significant for someone else," he says. "It's almost as if people were expecting me to be the voice [of the issue], yet I understood very little about mental health. I tried to be there for everyone and that almost ended up being a disaster. I was tired half the time, not being creative, not present in my own



p70 *Abstract Peaces, Auxin*  
 1 *Broken Things, Family Portrait*  
 2 *Abstract Peaces, Rediscover, Not Recreate*  
 3 *Barongwa, The Mothers*



space. My activism became a performance.” In the end, he had to “distance myself from it and focus on creating awareness in other ways”.

Whatever the downsides of a higher global profile, Maela feels that the rise of social media and digital platforms are helping African creatives to tell their own stories, rather than have them hijacked and presented through a Western lens.

### Acts of self-love

Another project, *Broken Things*, is the story of a couple who come to accept each other’s so-called flaws, and even their own. Her cataract-clouded eye turns clear; the bandages covering his face disappear. “Self-love is not as easy as it sounds,” Maela muses. “It’s a form of protest, especially for the black body that has been criminalised, ostracised and stigmatised in our society. Self-hate is embedded deep in our psyche. So self-love becomes an act of rebellion.”

Asked about his own journey towards self-acceptance, Maela

1 *Abstract Peaces, Seriti*

2 *Abstract Peaces, Rage. Regret. Return.*



“The city [Johannesburg] is my gallery and it’s accessible to everyone.”

describes it as “a revolution that requires me to learn every day.” And he’s starting to notice the difference in his approach to work.

His first residency project (at Cape Town’s Amplify Studios), *Be Glad UR Free*, is a mixed-media series taking a contemporary look at the concept of freedom. “I’ve always had the goal of telling a story seamlessly across different media,” Maela says of the series, which spans a photo album, a black-and-white film and audio files presented on a cassette. The project asks what it is that makes people free – a concept that, according to Maela, few of us have time to interrogate

while slaving away behind a desk so we can pay bills and taxes.

Having recently moved to Johannesburg, Maela finds it a better fit for his self-confessed problem with authority and “straight lines” than the country’s legislative capital. “There’s just so much more texture here. Cape Town is smooth and cordial; everything is politically correct. The streets are clean. The air is light. The art is minimal and abstract. Johannesburg is rough and rugged, and so is the art. It’s raw, it’s charged, it’s angry. It’s informed and ready to challenge all preconceived notions. The city is my gallery and it’s accessible to everyone.” **S**

