

City clickers snapping up the dawning of a bright future

A local photographic collective is looking at life with a fresh eye, writes Karen Rutter

THE rising sun frames the silhouettes of workers filing across a footbridge. Their path is canted slightly upwards, their bodies leaning gently into the angle. The way the early morning light is positioned, the workers are literally walking into a bright new day.

The photograph captures an entirely normal event in the lives of many South Africans, yet in its deceptive simplicity it speaks volumes about the past, present and future of the country and its people.

It's no surprise, then, that it was chosen out of a field of several hundred for the cover of the latest edition of *State of the Nation 2006-2007*, a compilation published annually by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) which evaluates government's delivery in terms of economics, politics, society and international relations.

The picture was taken by Mandla Mnyakama as part of a competition launched by the HSRC called the *Isolezwe Project (Eyes of the Nation Project)*.

Apart from featuring his photograph on the book's cover, an exhibition of Mnyakama's work will coincide with each city launch around the country.

Mnyakama is part of the Iliso Labantu (*Eyes of the People*) photographic collective, which is described as "a self-help group of township street photographers".

Interested to see what the collective is all about, I make my way to Harrington Street in the city centre where the group meets every Thursday afternoon.

Walking though the doors of AMAC (the Arts Media Access Centre), I see small groups of young people sitting around on plastic

chairs, talking animatedly.

Warren Nelson and Alistair Berg, mentors to the Iliso Labantu photographic collective, round up a group of 10 people and head upstairs. Here, the group will download and discuss the digital pictures they have taken in the past week.

Mnyakama, who works as a freelance photojournalist, is probably the most experienced of the collective. When the group is told Mnyakama's photograph has won the State of the Nation award, there is a round of applause.

"You know, I never had any formal photographic training at university or tech, although I would have liked that," Mnyakama tells me. "I had to leave school before I matriculated, to help my family – my father died when I was 10."

Raised in East London, 35-year-old Mnyakama came to the city in search of work, and while doing casual jobs, he discovered CAP in Woodstock. "I started doing photography there nine years ago. It has become my passion," he smiles.

He names David Goldblatt, Jürgen Schadeburg, Fanie Jason and Peter Magubane as personal inspirations, and credits award-winning and ex-Cape Times photographer Bennie Gool for giving him his first "proper" camera.

Over the years his work has appeared in numerous local publications, including the *Argus*, *Die Burger*, *City Press* and *Daily Voice* newspapers, as well as magazines such as *Drum* and the *Big Issue*.

"I feel very strongly about documenting social conditions. At the same time, I try to express myself artistically," Mnyakama says.

What about the cover shot for *State of the Nation*? "I took that very early in the morning, at Site C

in Khayelitsha. The people are walking to the train station along a footbridge. It's a very positive picture, about everyday people."

Taking pictures of everyday life in her community is something that is also important to Lindeka Qampi, 37, who looks every bit the arty photographer with her dreadlocks and beads. But when I speak to her, I am surprised to hear she only picked up a camera eight months ago.

"I didn't even know how to hold a camera when I came here," she says with a shy grin. "Now, I feel empty if I miss a week. I love taking pictures, I just want to learn more and more."

I admire some of Qampi's pictures – bright, unaffected, colourful scenes of her neighbourhood. "I would take even more, but it is sometimes dangerous to walk around Khayelitsha with a cam-

era," she says.

However, this is something the collective is challenging. They have embarked on a series of "walkabouts" in three different locations in Cape Town – Imizamo Yethu in Hout Bay, Du Noon and Khayelitsha in Site C – where they spent two days taking photographs and a third exhibiting their works to the community who formed subjects for their exhibition.

Nelson has been involved with Iliso Labantu for four years. "The aim is to try to improve the group's technical and business skills – and if this contributes to career opportunities, so much the better. It's also about working on artistic expression, and sharing ideas and skills."

When I leave, the group is clustered around Berg, who is holding up one of the pictures taken on the group's last outing to Du Noon.

"What is this picture telling us –

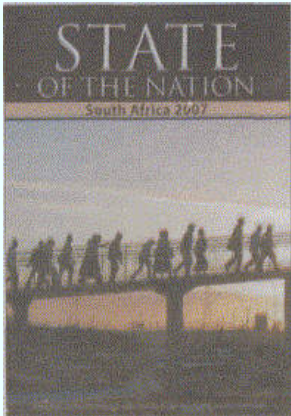


why did Naeem take it?" he asks.

Responses are enthusiastic, and debate ensues.

With initiatives like Iliso Labantu, the state of the nation feels very rich indeed.

● *State of the Nation 2006-2007 (HSRC Press) was launched at the end of November. The compilation will be available in all good bookstores.*



CLICK: From ballroom dancing (left) to Mandla Mnyakama's winning picture of commuters in Khayelitsha (below and top), the Iliso Labantu collective is changing the way we look at our city.

