



## TRUE GRIT

 For the past two decades photographer and painter Zwelethu Mthethwa has been documenting life in South Africa, focussing on everyday people to create portraits infused with dignity and defiance.

Born in Durban, Mthethwa has spent the majority of his adult life in a post-apartheid country. The political landscape informs his work and his subjects range from migrant workers in their living quarters to children in lush landscapes. Mthethwa is committed to the role of artists in highlighting social issues. Speaking about the end of apartheid, he says: "Artists were very vocal with the liberation of the people. The artists were involved in the struggle. But since we have a democratic government, art has taken a back seat which I find very foolish."

Continuing this tradition of using art to tell the stories of those on the fringes of society, Mthethwa plans to document the struggle of coal miners. "I've shot in the gold mines before and the conditions are very, very tough. Now we will see if they allow me to [shoot] the coal mine. They had said yes, but we will see," he says.

In 2013, Mthethwa is embarking on his most ambitious project to date with an exhibition in January at New York's Jack Shainman gallery. The show includes three of his photographic projects - The Brave Ones, Hope Chest and Still Life In Hostels. Mthethwa says the exhibition concerns "family, but looking at different aspects of family. There is a religious aspect and there is where the fathers, the men used to live or they still live. And there are stories about women and their history as well which is very cultural and traditional."

Mthethwa's ability to capture the nuances of the human experience means his work has an individual clarity in the way it explores modern-day life in Africa. And now his images are showing this under-represented life to the world. Mthethwa believes that, "It is only once artists become big outside of their home countries that their countries then take note. Artists are not politicians per se, we are art practitioners. So, I think we should just focus and continue doing what we are doing."

WORDS: LARRY OSSEMEKSAH  
[jackshainman.com](http://jackshainman.com)