

A F T E R W O R D

MY LIKENESS, MY BROTHER: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM NOUPOORT

BY IVOR POWELL

Benny.

That's his real name, no room here for euphemism or circumlocution.

Benny. A drug addict.

Benny. Square, solid, muscular: not what they call "ripped", but hard and physical, the kind of high-density guy who would of made a pretty useful hooker once upon a time.

That was before it all went bad. Now his torso is a palimpsest of multiple scratchings, hot metal brandings, self-inflicted scarrings. Some are seemingly the work of moments of unbearable passion, the violent imprints of anger and violence turned in on self. Others are more painstaking, even meticulous: on his left forearm, Benny has taken the time and trouble to cut - deeply enough to heal into a permanent red welt: "I HATE MYSELF" and "NAZI" - a theme picked in a similarly inscribed swastika on Benny's chest. Hard core.

Benny, lying on his side on a somewhat rumpled, somewhat grubby, half-made bed, with the kind of curtains in backdrop that make you think of boarding houses in the way the floral design jars in a random kind of way with the process green gingham of the duvet cover.

Benny is hard core. Heavy duty.

Blue jeans, the kind fitted with pockets like saddlebags; well-worn leather belt; heavy metal cross, affixed, by the kind of ring you might use for a bull's nose, to a heavy duty cord tied around Benny's substantial neck.

There's also something heavy metal about the strong, fleshily masculine features, the short-beard growing out unkempt and scratchy; last week's shaven head dark with this week's black stubble; something arresting about the deepset gaze, a quality that is somehow powerful, confrontational, challenging and fearful, mistrustful, even timorous at the same time.

And there is something somehow almost mischievously humorous mischievous around the eyes and the gaze... or is there?

Not that it really matters. What is important is to note that what seems at first glance to be a relatively standard documentary portrait of a young thug - and one that would likely be met with fear and loathing given the implied violence and the Nazi symbolism - has grown, in the looking into something more layered, more complex, more replete with ambiguities.

Like the incongruously delicate and shapely fingers, the long, elegant thumb of the hand resting on Benny's meaty thigh; the nervous hand of artist, not the foursquare fist of the street warrior, heavy metal bruiser, the Neo-Nazi thug.

Not that Benny was, necessarily, not those things as well - I wouldn't know one way or the other. What I am wanting to get hold of here is something different, something that happens in the photographic moment - somewhere between the photographer and the subject - where the image ceases to be just a record of how things looked, becomes instead infused with energies, contradictions, challenges, dimensionalities of understanding.

It is the moment when you see behind the mask, where persona - what we inhabit in public - gives way to person - what we are on the inside. And in the process our perceptions and our understandings come to be both challenged and enriched.

Exactly what transpires in that photographic moment, what defines the transaction between photographer and subject, remains mysterious. What is clear, however, is that Benny is relaxed, at rest at ease with himself and the space in which he finds himself. He is not using his physical presence, nor the semiotic quality of his expression to mark out his territory, or establish hierarchies or protocols in relation to Sean Metelerkamp, his photographer.

To put this differently there is a relation of trust that comes through in the moment that is captured in the photograph. A trust that is a necessary though by no means a sufficient condition for the revelation of humanity on the part of the subject and the discovery of that complex humanity on the part of the photographer. What is probably significant here - though I don't want to make too much of it - is that Metelerkamp did not go in to the Noupoort rehab as a photographer. He went on family business - because his brother John Michael had been signed in to the rehab facility for crystal methamphetamine addiction. Sean for his part was looking to reconnect and to understand the traumas his beloved brother was living through. In this scenario Noupoort presented itself as a kind of halfway house between family and drug life, and his fellow inmates as potential sources of information and intelligence relevant to his brother's headspace.

In fact, at the time Metelerkamp made his first foray into the world of the Noupoort rehab facility, in 2010, he didn't, by his own account, particularly think of himself as a photographer. The camera was taken almost as an afterthought - something he might use in relating to his brother's fellow inmates and getting to understand better the space they were in. Nor was the photographic setup to any professional standard. Metelerkamp had no access to lighting or high tech lenses in making his photographs, and the camera he was using was not of what is usually thought of as a professional standard.

"I was making music videos at that time, which involved a team and a bunch of equipment

and, so, to think of documenting something, like this, was out of my comfort zone. But soon into it I realised that the small camera and microphone could be used as a tool for non-confrontational dialogue and creative expression on their part. I purposefully interviewed and photographed my brother last, after I had come to a better understanding of addiction... and after I performed somewhat in front of him... so that he could see I was on his side."

This was as I said above, family business at the end of the day; a mission aimed at reclaiming emotional spaces; at bridging the chasm his brother's addiction had opened up within the family; repairing frayed, torn and otherwise damaged relationships. As Sean Metelerkamp describes it, John Michael's drug of choice - crystal meth, otherwise known as tik - was dumping him in some dangerously paranoid and delusional spaces, straining relationships within the family almost beyond breaking point:

"...things got really bad to the point where he was sleeping with knives - superparanoid - thinking that people were after him... he'd be waking up at three or four in the morning, switching on the lights, walking in to my mom's room saying there's someone in the house..."

Eventually, it got too much. And John Michael was booked into a rehab programme in the dusty desolation of Noupoort, a once bustling but now virtually deserted railway town (total population: 7 848 in 2011) just over 50 kilometres south of Karoo town of Colesburg in the Northern Cape.

Just over 50 kilometres from Colesburg and maybe fewer than 50 from the middle of nowhere, Noupoort has, over the years, commanded more news headlines than most settlements ten times its size - nearly always for the wrong reasons.

Almost exclusively, the bad publicity has centred on an institution with what is surely the least provocative of names: Noupoort Christian Care Centre (NCCC), but which has garnered, since its founding in 1992, the most fearsome of reputations. Set up by Evangelical Christian Pastor Sophos Nissiotis - by his own testimony himself a former substance abuser who saw the light - in pursuance of an understanding of addiction as falling within the framework of sin as opposed to sickness or psychopathology, treatment programmes developed at NCCC, if they can even be referred to as such, tended to be of the "bootcamp" variety - strong on discipline and punishment, even on the mortification of the flesh.

Not infrequently, as gradually emerged in the media, the harsh and uncompromising visions pursued in the NCCC spilled over into outright physical abuse - the use of handcuffs and chains, physical assaults, food deprivation and the like - and to what society in general would classify as cruel and unusual, even sadistic, measures like confining inmates for extended periods in subzero temperatures wearing only underwear and dousing them with buckets of ice cold water. And deaths were recorded, either attributable to suicide, or to the refusal of normal medical facilities to the centre's inmates. There is a lot that has been said on the subject of Nissiotis' NCCC, and a lot more that might still be said. This however is not the place: the rehab facility where John Michael Metelerkamp was placed, while also broadly

Evangelical Christian in character, was an operation separate from the correctionally-minded NCCC.

Styled as the Noupoot Drug Education Council (DEC) and pursued under the auspices of the eponymous Noupoot Drug Education Council Ministries, the facility was also registered as a different and distinct entity, with different funding and registration numbers, different trustees, etc.

Most importantly in this context, the DEC's guiding philosophies were of a gentler order: part homespun psychology and part Christian salvation.

According to Jono Rudolf, director of the DEC's life-skills programme, it's all about becoming the person God wants you to be:

“As children of the Creator, living in an interactive world, our possibilities are limitless. No matter what you are facing, God has a good ending prepared for you. The more clearly you see that end in your heart, the greater your capacity to endure and deal with pain and hardship.”

Where the DEC's life-skills programme comes in is in lies in changing and renewing the way we think:

“We need to address the beliefs we have held of feeling incomplete. With our thoughts and feelings we influence the world around us; we alter the physical function of our bodies, and we even reprogram our cells. We experience the reality we choose...”

If a little vague on the conceptual level, the DEC's rehab programme was convincing enough in practice. As Sean Metelerkamp experienced it, the rehab functioned through a strongly prioritised sense of community, highlighting solidarity and empathy in an environment focused on the supportive rather than punitive.

“There's definitely formed a kind of brotherhood between these guys... what they've been through... they've been on a similar path, they can understand each other. It happens very quickly... Someone will come in and within two three days, he's got a nickname and they're chirping him this and that... They all live together, they fight each other, they hug each other, they love each other...”

Though he doesn't use the word, the key value here – it underlies the sense of redemption too that Jono Rudolf projects in the “good ending” God “has prepared for you” - is self-acceptance; self-acceptance realised and sustained in collective empathy and understanding and mutual support. At least this is what Sean Metelerkamp brought out from the time he spent in the rehab environment. It is also, in a sense – as I noted above - what he took in with him, in terms of the questions he was asking, the kind of human understanding he was trying to find of a brother who was becoming lost to him.

I am making what I believe is an important point here and establishing an important

distinction. As institutions within society, rehabs - and the way that addiction, what we are in the habit of calling substance *abuse* - throw up any number of questions and issues and ambiguities. They also tend to evoke strongly emotional and frequently conflictual responses in society at large.

Above I pointed to some of the controversy that has arisen in connection with Pastor Nissiotis' NCCC, controversy and scandal that has on more than one occasion resulted in official and highly critical official investigations by arms of government, and in resounding calls for its closure. It is, however, equally true that for every critic there is a supporter. Throughout its existence, the NCCC has continued to claim - and to back up with testimony - high levels of success for its bootcamp methods, and its approach is one that is strongly endorsed by very large sectors of the populace. It is also true that the courts continued to refer convicted drug abusers to the NCCC - as well as the DEC programme - in sentencing.

The issues are complex and layered. They touch on human rights, on the rule of law, on social hygiene, punishment and rehabilitation, on religion, on family, on friendship; on any number of different levels of human organisation that one cares to mention. These are issues that will bear a good deal of interrogation, investigation and analysis.

Especially at a time when some very serious questions are being asked about the so-called war on drugs and even more so about the role of the USA - as the global superpower of the later 20th Century and the first part of the 21st - in pursuing that war, and muscling nearly half the world into adopting its arguably paranoid policies, they remain issues that are far from resolved.

We are still in the early days. What is already clear, however, is that there is a seismic shift in progress regarding drug policy globally. Already around half of all states in the USA have moved towards decriminalising marijuana, and some have gone so far as to partially its recreational use - in outright defiance of US federal policy. By the same token, various European governments around the world - among Portugal and Switzerland - have gone further, redefining drug usage as a social issue rather than a criminal problem.

To speak personally for a moment, let me say I believe it is somewhat overdue that society, both in this country and globally, rethinks the way that drugs have been handled by police, government and therapeutic industries in the past.

And I believe also there is a lot of work, that still needs to be done in South Africa around the ways in which the national psyche has been scarred - perhaps as much by the way the war on drugs has been conducted and the interests, historically, it has served, as by narcotic substances themselves.

Having said all this, however, it is equally important to note that one of the remarkable things about the body of photographs Sean Metelerkamp has made from three sojourns in the DEC is that it gives us no insights whatever into the issues and controversies alluded to above. There is an absence of photographic commentary, overt or implied, on how the denizens of

the DEC are treated by those in charge; nor on the regimen of rehabilitation to which they are subjected or exposed in therapy.

Indeed there is not a single photograph among the images selected by Sean Metelerkamp which shows any of the programme leaders and administrators, the DEC's functionaries, or even maintenance staff employed to keep the facility going. The view is exclusively that from within the inmate population and Metelerkamp's photographic gaze is turned exclusively upon the tokens and qualities of life exhibited by his brother and his brother's peers and fellows.

The cumulative record presented is of the group that Metelerkamp generically refers to as "the guys" in rehab; it does not pretend to be or aspire to be a record of the rehab itself. Instead, the photographic gaze remains unflinchingly and unflinchingly focused on the human particular. It never seeks to generalise - nor to arrive at or deliver any judgment whatever.

Nowhere is what this delivers more present to the viewer than in the portrait Sean Metelerkamp has made of the brother whose internment brought him to the DEC rehab in the first place. In the photograph, John Michael is unshaven. His face is framed with a spiky halo of unkempt spikes and untamed ridges. The skin looks blotchy and tired. The grey-green eyes are somewhat bloodshot, and, if you examine them individually, do not look as though they belong in the same face at all: the left eye is nearly round with a strongly articulated lid, that on the right deep set, more hooded and almond shaped. So too there is some lack of fit in the eyebrows, one curved and elegant, the other heavy and tired. Not only this, the eyes also appear to be responding to different light environments and different in the quality of their attention: the pupil of John Michael's right eye is dilated, engages with the outside world; his left recedes, the pupil lost behind a reflection.

It is a heartbreaking image, a portrait of a consciousness in a limbo of conflict with itself. Sean Metelerkamp's achievement, both as a brother and as a photographer in images like this is to have virtually removed himself - his own feelings, convictions, prejudgements - from the photographic moment, instead allowing the medium to find its own shapes, colours, values, and meanings - troubling though they certainly are.

By the same token, whatever else might be revealed when you interrogate or investigate its workings on more conventional lines - whatever issues brutalities or violence might be betokened in what is not sought out or highlighted - the Noupooort rehab is given back in Metelerkamp's photographs from the inside; its affect is that of raw, rough and ragged emotion, rather than the forensic gaze of journalistic or forensic record.

Next in the sequence of photographs is one showing the classic South African lower middle class back yard: crazy paving, one desiccated pot plant, biscuit brown distressed walls complete with ugly plastic plumbing, geyser and metal pipes protruding from a roof pregnant with dstv satellite dish - the unending suburban horror, punctuated only by the presence of ready packed suitcases by a wire table, minus its umbrella for now. Suitcases packed to come or to go. These particular ones, as Metelerkamp has recorded,

belong to one of the inmates about to leave the rehab, about to go back into the everyday world... that world he failed to deal with in the first place. But they would have the same troubling presence if they belonged to somebody at the very start of the rehab programme. In both directions, this is the end of the road, the terminus: its symbolism is that of travel and transition, but for now the future is caught up in a brooding uncertainty.

To come or to go? This is the overwhelming question, the duality that is also there to be read in John Michael's eyes: to come or to go? Both ways, this is the end of the road. The terminus. The time is set at the moment of truth.

Such sombre moods can also be found in photographs like one showing a group of DEC inmates in a makeshift chapel front-lit by a glowing neon cross. Some are hunched in intensities of sombre prayer, headless in unforgiving silhouette; others, shifting posture during the picture's long exposure, are ghosted into uncertain afterimages of themselves.

For many, even most, photographers an image like this would be discarded or deleted at the get-go. But Metelerkamp has worked, so to speak, behind the rules, using errors to expressive and essentially poetic effect and thereby heightening the haunted and brooding quality that pervades the composition. At the same time it gives to the viewer an image that brings to consciousness and reflects upon the role the Christian ministry plays in the rehab and how it is experienced by the guys: not about the ministry in itself.

I noted earlier that Sean Metelerkamp, by his own account, had no great artistic ambitions in taking his camera into the Noupooort rehab situation first time round, but instead believed it might serve as a tool in helping him come to terms with and ultimately understand what his brother and his brother's peers were going through.

This does not mean, though, that Metelerkamp was just a guy with a Kodak Instamatic. At the time his brother was committed to the DEC rehab, Sean was on a roll. After crafting and making the definitive video for South African sleaze rappers, Die Antwoord - the one with the boarding house sensibility and the Sunday suburban streets, and the fantastically trashy Ninja and Yolandi - he was busy making his mark and building a career in New York.

Metelerkamp is, in other words and not to put too fine a point on it, somebody with convincing credentials in the art end of the photographic medium, but also somebody with, so to speak, a paid up membership of the avant garde in cultural production. You can see something of the sensibility that was brought to the cauldron of zef in some of the personas that the more macho denizens of the DEC have adopted for the camera - like Benny.

But, the way he remembers it, Metelerkamp hung back at first:

"For the first two days, three days, I didn't take out my camera or microphone, I just hung out, and I let people ask, What are you in for? What are you in for? Then I stood up in church and said, Hi, my name's Sean, my brother's John Michael, I'm here just to stay with him for a month, and with you guys. And I would like to talk to you if you're

willing, and possibly take a photo. It's just my way of trying to understand how you guys landed up here, tell me a bit about your story... I didn't really have a plan, I just wanted to talk to people. This equipment, this camera and this microphone enabled me to go as deep as I could, because it was like, I'm working on something..."

That was the first time. The first month that Metelerkamp spent in the DEC rehab in Noupoot at the tail-end of the programme for which his brother was signed up in 2010. He also expected at the time it would be his last. He was, he says, satisfied "with the connection I now had with my brother" and the insights he had achieved during his sojourn in the rehab. But, he recalls:

"...as a visual person here I am working on photos, and I showed someone, who then showed Pieter Hugo. Pieter saw them. I didn't know him [at the time]. He phoned me up one day and he said, Come in I want to talk to you about your photos. And I showed them to him... the photos from 2010. He said you should go back, and I thought fuck I don't want to go back I don't ever want to go back to this place again... But the fact that he was saying it, you know, made me think okay I should think about it. So I didn't go back [immediately] and I got in a relationship with this girl and we were talking about life and stuff, and she saw the photographs, and she said, You should go back... So based off those two I thought maybe this can become some sort of a project..."

And to cut a long story short, Metelerkamp returned to Noupoot for a second month's stay in early 2012. This time his engagement was explicitly as a photographer, and his brother was not included in the rehab population; in fact John Michael was committed for a second stint, but asked that Sean hold back until he was discharged at the end of 2011. As Metelerkamp recalls:

"some of the guys who'd been there in 2010 were still there in 2012... and they said, Hey Sean What's up? And it was, Hey Vince, Hey Quince! And we carried on..."

Even so, it was not just a question of picking up on the photographic front where he had left off. In the photographic praxis of the 2012 sojourn there is a discernible shift away from a subject matter flayed, unmitigated, raw, urgent with its burdens of truth; on visual tropes and hard-edged truths landing with the force of blows to the solar plexus. Instead the photographic language segues into a somewhat deferred, indirect and mediated examination of experience as visually constructed somewhere among the eye, the brain and the photograph. As Metelerkamp explains the difference:

"2012 became a bit more of a collaboration in a sense... a creative collaboration with the guys... They started telling me stories and some of the guys... they'd re-enact a moment they'd had... it became a kind of creative therapy for them, I suppose..."

To put this differently, what is up for grabs in the photographic terrain traversed in the 2012 Noupoot sojourn is a set of *narratives* - as negotiated between subject and photographer - generated by and about the human subject; not, as before, the immediately existential

identity of that subject as encountered or constructed through the photograph. It is one where representation is the business of the day, not any longer the immediacies of presence and presentation.

In this register, the stratagems through which we project ourselves, the lies that we nurture about ourselves, the ways we protect or buffer ourselves against the world - these things come to communicate their own truths about who we are and the world in which we live. In their detail they also serve, emblematically, as cues to our shared humanity.

The truth is, hardly anybody really gets out of rehab once and for all. The majority of the Noupoot DEC's inmates has been there before and will be there or somewhere like it again in the future. It is not a place of easy answers, or miracle cures.

What we see instead in Metelerkamp's photographs is a population in a constant struggle with demons and darkness, circumstance - and self. There is a growing social critique in our times of the institutions of rehab, and more particularly of the way psychoactive substances have been internationally demonized and criminalized over the past half century under pressure from the USA. In the view of many observers - and there is a growing body of research and analysis to support the view - the so-called Global War on Drugs has not only definitively been lost, but was wrongheaded in the first place. Pursuing such logics, critics argue that in turning addiction into a law-enforcement issue, backed up and regulated by punitive measures like imprisonment and disgrace - rather of treating it within medical, societal and psychological frameworks - the authorities have merely made things worse.

This is not the place to provide answers to questions like these. I raise the issues merely to suggest that they remain far from resolved today. This means, for one thing, there is still a need to question or interrogate the motives and the dynamics sustaining rehabs, both in general and in particular.

At the same time, it is far from clear and self-evident they are on the right track in the first place. The narrative is not so much about cure and redemption, but rather about survival. Or not. Some of the brief interview texts accompanying Metelerkamp's photographs end with the chilling finality of a short story from hell.

The portrait of the self-scarred Benny - as discussed earlier - is offset against an account of his own extreme behaviour: "kicking the doors down and throwing the couches all over the house"; a growing remorse, focused especially on his young daughter, and the pain he was causing her; then "sitting here in Noupoot the last two months I realized that I was wrong... burning the house down... Ja, I'm feeling good. It's the first time in sixteen years that I've been clean for so long now..."

And finally: "Benny died a year later".

Another of the guys who didn't make it long term is Fanie, black haired, stubble unshaven, posed against an interior wall marred by light effects a different photographer might have

photo-shopped to make it less depressingly discoloured. An ugly and undistinguished backdrop - though certainly true of petit bourgeoisie living spaces in a harsh South African light, that here also randomly throws a picture hanging into a mute and undistinguished darkness. It is a space that fits with Metelerkamp's Fanie - spectacles pushed up on his brow, a Christian crucifix around the neck - gazing out from dark eyes that though far from confrontational or belligerent, put you, as the viewer, on terms far more than they open up as windows into his soul. The mouth is curled in lopsided amusement.

On the facing page:

“Yoh, I'm not gonna lie to anyone and say it wasn't fun because we have good times, but... if you take the amount of time you used it and the amount of time it takes to stop using it, and the pain and suffering you do to yourself and to other people... I wouldn't... it doesn't - it's not fun...”

“Fanie,” we learn, “committed suicide two months after this interview”.

Many of the guys however have not died, and some have convincingly reintegrated themselves into society in general. While images like those Metelerkamp made of Benny and Fanie serve as uncomfortable reminders of just how high the stakes can be, the Noupoot photographs in their totality are more focused on the textures of life as experienced in the DEC rehab than they are shadowed with death.

A theme that runs throughout - bubbling up to the surface in all three of Sean Metelerkamp's sojourns in the DEC rehab - is one asserting a physically expressed male bonding imaged across activities ranging from thankless spadework in the red Karoo sand, to gymwork, to recreational collective squeezings of boils and zits, to bouts of roughhouse wrestling and ritualized contestations of masculine physicality.

In such sequences of pictures, you could find, if you wanted to, a homoerotic subtext. But that is not what is most striking or most significant: that the roughhouse is an existential ritual, and as much as the wrestling of body against body is a struggle and a test of strength, it is also a source of comfort.

It is not by way of an answer, but what comes into focus is a sense of community and a solidarity worth carrying through into living.