

THE DEAD ZONE by Greg Marinovich

A portfolio of 41 colour photographs

The Dead Zone portfolio, compiled in association with Strauss & Co's founding director Stephan Welz, offers a wide-ranging visual history of the internecine conflicts and violent strife that engulfed large parts of South Africa in the 1990s, showing the transition from apartheid to democracy.

Following the unbanning of 33 political parties and release of political prisoners in 1990, in the protracted lead-up to non-racial elections in 1994, South Africa teetered on the brink. The topography of war in this portfolio includes a cramped Thokoza hostel, a rain-soaked street in Duduza west of Nigel, a Bantustan capital in the Eastern Cape, a rural valley north of Durban, and Shell House in Jeppe Street, Johannesburg. In a 1994 article for *Leadership* magazine, Marinovich collectively described these places as the “dead zone”.

By his reckoning, Marinovich covered a dozen massacres during the 1990s, being an event marked by the indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of many people. Marinovich later discovered a Truth and Reconciliation Commission report that spoke of 122 massacres in the Pretoria, Greater Johannesburg and Vaal Triangle area between 1990 and 1992 alone. “There is so much that wasn’t covered,” he says. While Thokoza, a working-class settlement southeast of Johannesburg, may well be a “forgotten battlefield from a forgotten conflict” – as Marinovich proposes in a caption – his photographs offer unflinching witness to the painful becoming of a nation. They are a reminder of what was sacrificed by ordinary people to achieve liberation.

This work extended into our current time, with Marinovich’s investigative coverage of the Marikana Massacre and the subsequent book, *Murder at Small Koppie* that won the Alan Paton Award for non-fiction in 2017.

The portfolio was donated to the Constitutional Court Trust by the Dippenaar Family Trust in 2018.

About the artist

Greg Marinovich (South African, 1962 -) is a photojournalist, filmmaker, photo editor and author. He distinguished himself as a member of the so-called Bang-Bang Club, a group of four photo-journalists who documented the deadly conflicts that preceded the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994.

He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Spot News Photography in 1991 for a series of photographs of African National Congress supporters murdering a man they suspected of being an Inkatha Freedom Party spy.

Artist statement

The Nineties were a really strange and dislocated time in our recent history – years of great hope and fear, of confusion and new beginnings.

The great epoch of Apartheid was slipping away, most of the so-called petty apartheid laws had disappeared. Those ridiculous European versus non-European signs had disappeared, as if by magic. All those park benches were repainted, suddenly without racial currency.

The *Dompas* had lost its cruel power over people. It was a time of almost rapturous joy and hope. Yet it was laced with a poison unlike any we had seen. It was a toxin that was a noxious mix of political rivalry, racial hatred, ethnic animosities and greed masquerading as principle. It played itself out in an extended spasm of death. The Nineties was a decade of massacres, some infamous, others well-nigh unrecorded.

A Wikipedia search some years ago tells us just four massacres that took place during the Nineties in SA: Boipatong June 17, 1992; Bisho Sept 7, 1992 (41), St James Church 25 July 1993 (11); and Shell House 28 March 1994 (19).

I can recall photographing the aftermath of many more. In Sebokeng, the night vigil for ANC leader Chris Nangalembe was attacked and 38 mourners killed. That was January of 1991, not a day etched into our collective memory. In the same area, same year, 14 people were killed at a protest march. Swanieville in 1991 – 28 people killed. I recall going to two mass funerals that took place on consecutive weekend in the KZN midlands, at Table Mountain in 1993. The victims of one were all IFP supporters and the others all ANC supporters. Let us not forget the Christmas Day massacre at Shobashobane when 18 people were killed.

There was a morning in Vosloorus, on the East Rand, when I drove in alone in my quite inappropriate Ford Capri. It was a cold morning in Spring, and I drove right into a massive crowd of residents. Holding my camera up to the windscreen, I eased forward; confident I would be allowed to pass.

Quite what that confidence was based on was unclear then, and even more so now. Within a minute, the crowd had turned on me and began to rock the car, calling for me to be killed, until one man caught my eye and he began to call on the mob to back down, that I was a journalist. The attack ceased and the crowd parted for me to continue through.

The streets were deserted and as I made my way towards the complex of hostels. I saw two men standing over a dead man lying on his back. I pulled the car over and one man leaned down with a knife and began to castrate him. I got out and lifted my camera. The second man pointed a handgun at me and told me to put down the camera. The other man continued with his grisly work. When he was done, he lowered handgun and told me that now I could take pictures.

At the hostel itself, the street surrounding the fortress-like walls were littered with bodies. Police were going from one to the next, covering them and groups of residents watched. A woman in her dressing gown swept her section of sidewalk, sending up little puffs of dust as men with red headbands peered out from the hostel entrances across the way.

Despite more than a dozen people having died, there is no record of a Vosloorus massacre, or even a battle, in any record I can find. Except for a handful of negatives, and the memories of a small township, it is as if it never happened. This was the reality of the Nineties, of that so-called Hostel War. It was a parade of death. To many, we were in a descent into a more widespread civil war, anarchy.

Let me quote a figure from the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's findings: from 1990 to 1992, there were 122 massacres in the Transvaal alone.

We managed to move away from the politics of violence to that of the ballot box, yet we cannot forget the cost so many paid – memory is a vital part of our humanity.