

Winner of
the 1993
Ilford Press
Photographer
of the Year
award



Police attempt to arrest an armed man in Ratanda township.

Joao SILVA

JOAO SILVA, one of South Africa's leading conflict photographers and winner of the Ilford Press Photographer of the Year award, is reluctant to talk about himself or his work.

Born in Portugal, Silva grew up in Mozambique and spent some time in Lisbon before arriving in South Africa in 1976. He doesn't fill in any of the biographical details, but says he came to photography by chance about five years ago when he borrowed a friend's camera at Johannesburg's Grand Prix race track at Kyalami and realised that photography was "something I could do". **HAROLD GESS** reports

Joao
SILVA



*1992: An
Inkatha
war party
comes under
fire as they
attempt
to board
a train at
Phumalong
Station,
Soweto.*

“Some frontline people can go through a lot and cope with it. Others can’t.”

Not only could he take photographs instinctively but he also had the inclination to take his cameras into the eye of the storm, recording at source the violence that has turned South Africa into one of the news capitals of the world.

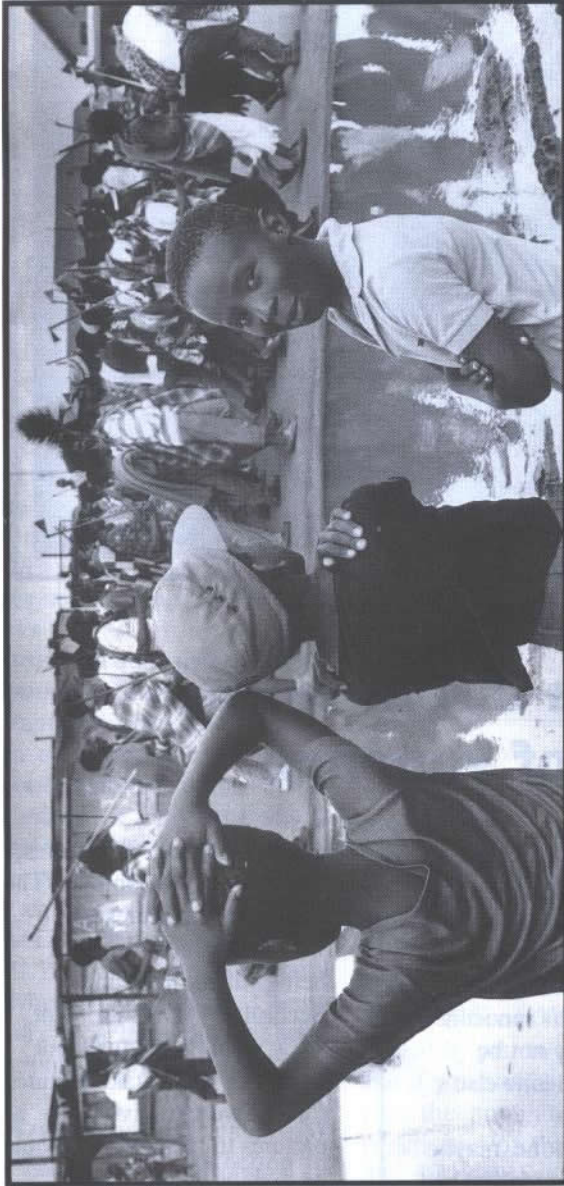
He had only been shooting news pictures for two years when the Reef started cooking and he took his cameras into high-risk situations. “I wanted to show people what was really happening. They have a right to know.”

Going to the source was a decision that has won Joao Silva acclaim but it has also immersed him in the searing violence that is tearing the social fabric of South Africa apart and which threatens any hope of a future democracy.

“Ultimately the real story isn’t about me, it’s about the people around me. I’m there by my own choice to record an event. That’s what I choose to do. But for me it’s a personal choice. I don’t see myself as a news item.

“Nobody tells me ‘you must go into this conflict situation and do this’.

Nobody has the right to do that to anybody, but for me



1993: Children in Thokoza watch the adults go to war.

bodies, bodies... That can be very emotionally draining... It’s saturating, but then I think the conflict situation is also very addictive.

“When its Sam and you’re in a place like Sebokeng and there’s mist and fog and barricades and guys sitting in the shadows with guns and so on, you feel tension and fear, but it’s more like it only hits you afterwards and you think, ‘shit that was heavy’. But you always go back for more.

The danger is always there. I got hit with shrapnel in Soweto. Some guys from a TV crew and I were getting back in our car when there was an explosion, a hand grenade, and I thought ‘shit that was close’ and I just carried on taking pics. Then I saw some of the TV crew lying on the ground. I didn’t even realise I was injured too, ‘till someone told me I was bleeding. At other times I’ve had my head cracked with a rock.

“It’s often a crazy experience out there; being shot at, kicked in the face, having guns pushed in your mouth or being dragged away from the scene at gunpoint. But that goes with the

PLEASE TURN OVER

can go through a lot and cope with it, others can’t. If they can’t take it, they won’t stay in the frontline. It’s as simple as that. There are very few real frontline photographers in South Africa — people like Greg Marinovich, Kevin Carter, Ken Oosterbroek and myself.

“I don’t feel I have any psychological problems, if you look for signs like recurring dreams or something like that to measure them. I don’t have any of that. Obviously I get emotional... I’m only human. “Seeing the effects of violence, seeing bodies,



it’s a personal choice. It’s what I’m here to do. My mission is to show people the truth. A lot of my stuff isn’t the best but it’s an authentic historical record.

“I’m not at all gung-ho. In fact, I’m completely anti-war. It’s just that most of the major changes in life or in history come about through violence. Sometimes the truth is shock and horror and I’m not against showing that. It it wasn’t for all the press coverage of violence and brutality there wouldn’t be such an outcry against violence.

“Some frontline people

Joao

SILVA



1990: Zulu women attack an ANC supporter in Thokoza.

“The camera is a threat to the perpetrators of violence”

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territory. If you can't take that you shouldn't be there.

“Still, South Africa's relatively easy to work in because you always come back out into your sane reality, your home and your TV and music and everything. I've been in other places like Angola, Sudan, Somalia and Mozambique. In places like Somalia you live in a war zone all the time. There's no comfortable hotel to go back to. There's no getting back to reality. It leaves you very, very tired and emotionally drained.

“The press has exposed so much with pictures of

executions, massacres, brutality and so on. You may see something going on and think, ‘God that's so gross. How can they do that?’ The point is that what's innocence in your mind may not be innocence in someone else's mind.

“You see someone, maybe an Inkatha guy gets killed and it's clearly murder, but you don't know what happened before the incident. Maybe he was involved in a killing earlier on and what you're watching is revenge. You can't know.

“The camera is a threat to the perpetrators of violence. A number of people are

arrested because of pictures. Then, it's often complex. The police want pictures and I won't give them any. I'm being subpoenaed under Section 205 at the moment. They want the pictures but that's not what I take pictures for. If I were to give my pictures to the police, I would be making myself and all journalists more of a target than they already are.

“I like motorcycles. Watching Grand Prix racing is good. If I get time off on a Sunday — but often Sundays are busy with funerals or something — I go rock climbing. Nothing makes you feel more alive.” ●