

THE BIG PICTURE

'Her photographs show just how approachable people actually are'



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THE PHOTOGRAPHER:
Monique Pelser

Born in Johannesburg (1976), Pelser completed a course at the Market Photo Workshop in 1996 before embarking on fine art studies at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, where she is currently a lecturer in photography

WHAT would your reaction be? A young woman approaches you, saying she wants to take a picture of your work clothes.

The twist, though, is that you won't actually appear in the picture; she will, wearing your clothes, pretending to be you.

Just to complicate things, you'll have to wear her clothes and physically take the picture.

This, roughly, is how Monique Pelser introduced herself to people as she travelled the country for a year, variously photographing herself dressed as a bicycle mechanic, a butcher, a deck hand, a librarian, a postman and a truck washer.

All in all, she photographed herself pretending to be 50 different people in their work environments.

Her oddball request was hardly ever refused: "I think people were quite bewildered by what I was doing, so they didn't

really ask questions."

Proving just how approachable people were, she tells how, shortly after contacting a police area commissioner to request permission to take a photograph, she found herself in his pants, quite literally.

The idea for the project — which inverts the usual power relations involved in portraiture, in particular the photographer's dominant role over the subject — sprang from a conversation with fellow photographer Brent Meistre, then her master's-degree supervisor at Rhodes University.

"I did a lot of portraiture in my undergraduate degree," explains Pelser. Mostly, it was predictable and safe stuff.

"At some point we wondered what it would be like to dress up in the clothes of the people one photographs.

"At first I thought, never, that's just rude. Actualising it also seemed impossible. But

it played on my mind for a while."

Not long afterwards she found herself drowning in a fireman's suit, later that same day wearing a mechanic's grubby overalls.

"That was hectic," she chuckles. "I arrived without socks, and when I changed into his clothes there was sweat in the arms, [and in] his shoes, too.

"All the other mechanics laughed at me. When I took his shoes off there was a little splinter of metal under my toenail."

It wasn't the only side-effect of her subsequent adventure: "I picked up ringworm from one of the outfits."

So, which job does she reckon is the worst? "Easy," she replies, "a sewerage worker's." The job stinks.

— Sean O'Toole

● Monique Pelser's exhibition, *Roles*, is on show at the Market Photo Workshop from April 4.