Hand position and the slight tilt of hats are seemingly small details in a photograph of three children arranged on a fallen tree from the Brave Ones series of 2010. On closer inspection, however, these elements convey distinct and recognizable demeanors—stoic, pensive, and spirited—in children who appear to carry the complexities of their future adult selves in their youthful dispositions. This idea is subtly reinforced in the shapes of the trees behind the grouping, twisting growths that have inhabited the landscape much longer than the children. The straight, strong trunk to the far right and the turn of the middle tree’s lowest branch echo the body positions of the two standing figures, foreshadowing the young people’s maturation and creating an elegantly balanced image.

A mong the many kinds of photographic portraits that populate our visual culture—ranging from family snapshots to news photos—the images of Zwelethu Mthethwa (pronounced zweh-LEH-too mm-TATE-twa; South African, born 1960) stand apart for the thoughtful craft through which they reveal the individuality of their subjects. As with the work of other outstanding photographers of Mthethwa’s generation, including Rineke Dijkstra (Dutch, born 1959) and Wolfgang Tillmans (German, born 1968), these pictures are animated by nuances of posture and expression and the specific accoutrements that indicate a sitter’s relationship to his or her setting. Through Mthethwa’s perceptively considered compositions, the viewer gains a sense of each figure’s humanity regardless of whether or not he or she shares the same background.
Mthethwa’s works also address the particular South African contexts in which he photographs. The Brave Ones series, with its vivid presentation of uniformed children, provides a window onto the festive garments of the Zulu Nazareth Baptist Church and the landscape of a region north of Durban, to which worshipers from this several-million-member independent church make an annual pilgrimage. The social history and politics of South Africa—the country in which Mthethwa was born and continues to live—also underlie his Interiors series of the mid- to late 1990s. Studies of homes made from impermanent materials on the outskirts of Cape Town, these images reflect the socio-economic stratifications that arose during years of apartheid government, a racially segregated system that included laws restricting non-whites from living within city limits up until the early 1990s. However, rather than representing the human subjects of the Interiors as anonymous examples of a historically marginalized population, Mthethwa communicates highly individual stories grounded in daily life by capturing distinct aspects of dress, lively interior decoration, and personal attributes, like the small white dog seen at the feet of a seated woman in the work illustrated here.

Mthethwa’s pictures further connect to audiences through formal qualities found throughout the history of art. Educated as a photographer—first at the University of Cape Town and then at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York—the artist spent time painting during his early career, and there are many correlations between his photography and the traditions of European painting. The pose, patterns, and contained spatial organization of Mthethwa’s portrait of a woman resonate with Henri Matisse’s The Yellow Dress (1929–1931), a work in the BMA’s Cone Collection. The brilliant color and lyrical figures at the center of the lush vegetation in the Brave Ones pieces suggest the fanciful forested scenes of Post-Impressionist Henri Rousseau. And Mthethwa’s commanding pictures of workers in the sugarcane fields of southern KwaZulu-Natal province evoke Jean-François Millet’s mid-19th-century paintings of laborers in the French countryside.

Curator Okwui Enwezor has astutely noted that with the Sugar Cane series (2003), Mthethwa, like Millet, created an “allegorical representation” of the economic, cultural, and philosophical relationships among people, their labor, and the land. South Africa’s colonially-determined agrarian structure, which has placed majority landownership in the hands of whites while assigning the role of laborer to non-whites, is the stage upon which these dramatic compositions have been set. Yet, unlike the shadowy and downturned faces found in Millet’s paintings, the men in the Sugar Cane works distinguish themselves through their unique clothing, forceful handling of tools, and scrutiny of the camera. In these powerful details, Mthethwa’s pictures above all remain rich opportunities for contemplating human character through a photographic lens.