

Conversation with Mike Davies at his apartment in Woodstock district of Cape Town in November of 1985.

I was born in 1955 in Johannesburg. I went to St. Johns, a private school. Then I spent a year in the air force, the South African Air Force with my call up. And then a year at INAUDIBLE, then a year at INAUDIBLE. And then three and a half years of civil engineering. And then I moved to Capetown in 1979 and did a year of fine arts to get a B.A. in photography at Machalis art school, and then I began to work at my masters in photography. My master's thesis is called, "A Photographic Investigation of Some Aspects of South African Leisure-Time Activities." I am a free-lance photographer. I was in the Staffrider 1985 Exhibition, the Grahamstown Festival of the Arts in 1985, and the Machalis exhibition at the Market Gallery in Johannesburg. Publications: Frontline Magazine

My mother did art and she has always painted. And now currently she's involved in a water color association in Johannesburg. She has had quite a few exhibitions of her own, oil painting and watercolor. My dad is a mechanical engineer. He works for Anglo-American and grew up on the mines, most of his life spent on the mines. His father came out from Australia and fought in the Boer War, on the Australian side. He was a captain in the Victoria Mounted Rifles. So he fought against the Afrikaaners. He went back after the war but he came back because he liked the country and he settled here. And my basic background is that my grandmother on his side came from England and my grandmother on my mother's side came from Scotland. Her father I think came also from Europe, I think from Germany.

When I was growing up, I had a lot to do with mining with my civil engineering degree, but as a kid I didn't have much to do with it. It was only when I left school, when I was a medic in the Air Force, we did a lot of evacuations, casualties and so on, it was the only time the Active Citizen Force was really involved during the border wars because at that time the police was still up there. And they were only just taking over in 1972. It was actually very interesting.

When I left school I wanted to do medicine. I thought of doing medicine. But that is actually how I got into the Air Force. I wanted to be a doctor and I had to sign up for the Air Force if I wanted to do medicine through them. But I decided not to. I spent a year as a medic, and decided no I didn't want to go through with it. I didn't really know what to do. I thought that Ecology would be quite nice because I was really involved with wildlife and the outdoor situation. My Dad said that for every year that I was at Varsity, if I passed, he would pay for it. Well, I failed Physics in my first year. So I had to stop and Marion Roberts Construction hired me. And every four months I had to go and work in Pala Boro which is in the eastern Transvaal on the border of the Krueger National Park. They were building a big phosphate mine up there. They have got huge reserves of phosphate up there, enough to last them 200 years at the present rate. That is the biggest open pit mine in the world. And I gave up engineering because

coming back from Pala Boro I had a motorcycle accident, somebody hit me. And I was off work for almost a year. More than a year actually. So when I went back to work it was 1976, and we were involved in a depression here, so Roberts Construction wanted to terminate my contract. But they realized that they couldn't and they weren't prepared to send me back on site again after that because they were worried that something would happen to me. So they transferred me to the drawing office. And I was very unhappy in the drawing office. And I just ended up drafting, and redrawing drawings. And I got no job satisfaction. And I was very lucky that I met an architect who taught me perspective drawings. And I ended up doing 3 dimensional perspectives artists impressions of Building sites. And while I was sick, my mom gave me some oil paints and encouraged me to paint and draw. And when I was back in the drawing office, I still carried on painting. And then I realized I really hated that job. A friend of mine who was an engineer said to me, "why don't you go and do what you really want to do? Go and do fine art and learn how to paint" I heard that Capetown had a good name. I applied and I was accepted. My father was very against it, but he realized that I wouldn't make much of a living. And also being an engineer he was a very practical person. He couldn't see me giving up four years of engineering when I was so close to finishing. And I just said, No, I don't think I'll ever do engineering again. So I said that I would get some money from my insurance and I would cash that and go and do fine art. And that is what happened.

My sister is older. She's married and has two children. My brother is younger and he's an extension officer working on a game reserve. I see them maybe once a year, maybe twice.

When I was growing up, I had very little exposure to black children and going to a private school, I was expected to play a sport in the afternoon. So the only day that I really had was Sunday to myself. And I actually rebelled against St. Johns, I was almost expelled from it because of I hated my schooling. Absolutely. I think because I was privileged to be sent to private school in a way and didn't really appreciate it for what it was at the time. I rebelled against religion and the way they pushed it down my throat. I rebelled against going to school on Saturday when all my friends never had to. I wanted to grow my hair long and wasn't allowed to, and the more I rebelled, the more I was punished for it, and the more I was punished for it, the more I hated it. And my father said he would take me away from the school, and my mother said no, get your education there and then you can leave.

And I had just one friend throughout the nine or ten years and I don't see any people from school now, except my brother in law, who was disenchanted as well. I've lost touch with everyone who was there.

When I went to Michaelas and wanted to do photography as a major, it was in my second year when photography was offered as a submajor, I took photography as a second subject, because I had a camera and I wanted to learn about processing and development. I had always had a camera and as soon as I started doing photography, I realized right away that photography helped my art, it helped me in what I was

seeing. It gave me exposure to things I didn't learn in a studio....in life-drawing situations I might learn something, but the actual real enjoyment came in that week when I would do photography and I would get out there and actually experience people and meet people and then the projects we would do.

My photography went very slowly. I had a very poor teacher in my second year. He wasn't interested at all in teaching. That was his last year at Michaelis. That was Bob Denton. I don't even know if I should mention any names. He was involved with computers at the time and he spent, if it was ten minutes a week, you were lucky, with the students in crit. When my exam came at the end of second year, he wasn't even present. So I don't know what was said, but I got a reasonable mark in photography. But at that stage I was more interested in Drawing so I really hoped I would get a good mark in drawing which I did do. Then in second year we had a new lecturer, in photography. That was Jeff.

What I really experienced was a project which was called self-portrait. That posed a bit of a problem because it was actually how you saw yourself. And I saw myself ultimately as an artist, but I wanted to portray myself honestly. We were at the time getting lectures in the theory of art. And an interesting part of that was the role of the shaman in society. So one day I painted myself. I went out in the desert and I painted myself in black and white, in Zebra stripes because it suited the dunes, the ripples in the dunes created this kind of Zebra effect in the sand. And that kind of blended with almost a shadow over my body as I saw it. So I painted myself as a Zebra figure. And I started off with this first blank landscape with these dunes, and then approaching the camera from afar, then right up close confrontation. And that was just the initial stage, as the artist as shaman representing.

[The shaman's role in society is to carry out, to deliver the tribe of their evil or their sickness. And I saw the role of the artist in the sort of sick society in which we live to be very much like the role of the shaman in tribal society. And that awakened thought and thought process and how you can actually use it and how very dramatically you can put it across in a few simple frames.] I mean that's basically what movies are about.

Documentary photography in that sense, because it plays a much stronger role in art, in photography than say in pure, classical, romantic landscapes. I think it has a lot more meaning because of time. I think ultimately time is what proves a work of art. There have been so many photographers who have never ever really been recognized. But lately prints have been dug up of work long since made. And that's true of any art really. Time is important. And obviously documentary photography which records a particular era or a particular part of society. Now an artist, a good photographer will actually see that and he will recognize it and he will attack it and he will record it. Even though he may never publish it or exhibit it, the fact remains that there was that curiosity that spurred him to take that picture. And that is important. I think that is vitally important. And I don't see my role now, if I was to go out and take

advertising shots all day for the rest of my life and be paid a wonderful salary for which I could go and by material things, I am not actually happy in that situation.

The shaman originated in Siberia, with the Eskimos and he spread across Europe. That is actually the role that a photographer can play. He can actually make people aware, and he can take, he can go on to the side of the sick people, not necessarily the sick people in the physical sense, but the underprivileged or the less exposed people, and expose it. He can do that. A painter can't put across reality. That is what the photographer has....Reality. Nobody can deny that. You can't question it.

Very few people go out with their cameras. My mother works a lot with her camera. Her landscapes come from her vision in the country.

I feel that photography in South Africa is not really recognized as an art form, in the higher circles. They have the triennial in the national galleries and they have conferences for the sake of art in South Africa....

Omar: While it is true in the white art circles that one is afraid to confront reality as an artist.

Davies: But I can only speak from the white circles because I'm....

Omar: [But the black artist confronts reality all the time. And he paints it and photographs it all the time. Even if it is crude, it is there. Township artists utilize their surroundings and they incorporate this everyday reality in their work. But in white South African Art has been faced for generations with this terrible tension - the tension between committed art and non-committed representational art of abstract art. And this new school of committed art is only now coming to the front, committed art, this new school of committed artist, like Gavin Young and people like that, who are now utilizing material, in a statement that is quite bold. It is becoming quite vibrant. But in the schools there is tension. It depends on the teachers and their perceptions. But you see the tension in the schools themselves because the prof's might not agree.]

Mike: the most important lesson I learned from Michaelis, which applies to any art form is the function of how that art works. And obviously, metaphorically, it can work on a much higher level than just on a pure plain statement, on a documentary statement. Any photograph which is richly imbued in symbolism, but not necessarily iconic symbolism, but relevant symbolism to the subject matter, that raises the status of the photograph from documentary to an art image, because it functions not only on one level.

Omar: What you are in fact saying now is that a lot of the people in this country, people in the so called art world, are not educated in the idiom of photography. And they don't see the relevance.

Chris: I thought initially, and was exposed, first of all to the American photographers, Lewis Hine, and Steiglitz, Strand, Caponigro,

SHAMAN
Photog vs
Painting
Davies

Black ART
vs white
ART
Committed vs
non committed
DAVIES

ARTIST
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Adams, Cunningham, all of those, the F64 group. and those were the people who initially held my interest. And I wanted to photograph landscapes or cactuses and go out and experience that kind of vastness and try and feel. But then I looked at the constructivists and the German group, particularly the Weimar republican artists, and I kept on going back to those artists, because whenever I saw.....Well I would go to the races and I was working at the races. In all the hundreds of photographs of the races that I saw, there was never one that captured the race atmosphere. [like that German photographer took in the Weimar, that whole constructivist way of seeing, Moholey-Nagey, etc. And I think that is really where documentary photography grew out of. Because it grew out of that statement the Nazi thing. Hartfield really utilized that. He was the very first person to make it known.]

[But I don't ever really wish to make political statements out of my art. And I don't intend them to be used in that sense because the photographs that I take of people are not to degrade their existence. Because a lot of them are very proud in their picture and their existence and their dwellings or wherever I would photograph them, their surroundings. And I believe that if I was to photograph them, I would always like them to come across as they would like to come across. And I don't believe in people in wanting to come across as poor, pitiful people. And I have photographed people who have been pitiful and sick, on a winter's evening in Alexander Township, a girl of four and a half years old who had not clothes to keep her warm. Her head was swollen from malnutrition. I couldn't help photographing her. But when I photographed her, I actually became repulsed inside me. I don't know what it was that made me feel that way. I just felt, "What am I doing photographing this person when I could do so much more than photograph her and expose that? OK, I could take that and put it in a newspaper, or whatever, but it wouldn't help that person. The only way that I could really help her would be to take her into my home and give her what I had. That's the only way. And I believed then that photography in that sense which is used for that purpose doesn't really serve that purpose but tends to almost degrade the person in a way, I think. It almost.....]

Omar: Photography is used by those people when they are organizing. And those people, when that child, her mother, her brother are organized, belong to a movement in Alexander.

Mike: Than that would be far more powerful than a photographic image. Then the movement becomes more powerful.

Omar: And the movement demands that you as a photographer look at them, at part of their movement.

Mike: then it becomes another story

Omar: Then it becomes a statement, a political statement. But you deny that political statement!

Mike: No, not at all.

Omar: It is a valid statement. Then it becomes a valid statement. Ther

that picture is part of a people's history and a people's dignity and a people's struggle, and these are people who are moving forward.

Mike: But then I wouldn't see it so much as being.....If I was to go and photograph it, I wouldn't necessarily.....If I was asked to photograph something like that, I don't know whether I would photograph it. I would tend to take things as I saw and I felt and I wanted to portray, a project that I wanted to put my understanding to and go out and try and understand it in that sense. Because otherwise it becomes Reportage.

Omar: But those people invite you into their homes, into their movement, into their struggle, and you have to learn to understand that struggle.

Mike: Sure, I can understand that.

Omar: Then your pictures go beyond just propoganda.

Mike: Sure, because they become an understanding of your interpretation and your interpretation must be individual for it to be made a statement because you must obviously feel and have a total identity for those people, an affinity for them otherwise you are not serving any purpose to yourself or to them.

I hope that my photographs will make not just a political statement about the inequities in this country, I hope that my photographs work on different levels, they should when they tend to work in a way that a rich photograph would work. I think a photograph that you see, you may not be attracted to it. But you go back to it, there may just be certain other things in it which become.....metaphorically rich. way of thinking and a certain understanding of a way life for a certain people.

I mean there have been so many moments that I have actually missed which have been the nail on the head - that specific moment when you are caught in a situation that is very strange. Everybody knows, who has lived in South Africa, according to whether they are white or black or whatever, you may tend to discriminate. You always will discriminate. You can't get away from it. Every person does. And there is that time when discrimination doesn't mean a thing. It goes beyond that relm. Either it becomes.....I don't know....it becomes very difficult....I'd have to dig out pictures for you. I can think of one specific example. A Goldblatt picture....There is a little white boy on a farm, and he is being looked after by a maid, the nurse. And if you look at that photograph, the maid's hand, touching the little boy's ankle is what unites those two people. And that little boy posing has total trust in that maid. That maid is his mother figure. And yet later on, I don't know the indoctrination process that he will go through, but she would become a class away from him. That is what I am getting at.

I am hoping to show a certain richness in my pictures. I think the guy who is the lonely hut dweller in the summit of the mountains of Lesotho who doesn't have any material possessions at all, a stone hut,

Doc photog
+ Weimar
DAVIES

Photographs
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there's hardly any sheep there, there's beds of grass even. There is rocks and snow on the ground, a blanket and a tin with some corn in it. I mean what really is his leisure time. He doesn't worry about going to Baxter Theatre or lying on the beach or drinking Coca-Cola. And we just seem to in a way take for granted....they are really very much part of our lifestyle. But obviously, given that situation in which he was brought up, which he knows, which he identifies with, he is perfectly happy. So I can't say that under that pure, tribal situation.....actually he is totally happy....he is within his element. But if you look at the way I have photographed him, he is not happy with me. He is not happy with me photographing him. And the reason is that he is a migrant laborer. He works on the mines. And he was there because he was on leave, and he had brought his money home for his mother who is too old to work and his father who is 86. And the mother the old mine bangles on her hand. Her father has worked on the mines. And that is the whole sad story behind it all. There is no more....their children are brought up,....purely, they tend the cattle...If they can turn six sheep into twelve sheep, they are good herdsman. They will be rich one day. But then they have to go to the mines, because Lesotho can't support them. This is the sadness of it all. And it must be read in terms of that, but then I can't write books on it. My photographs cannot show all of those things. But a series of photographs and what I learned through that,can.

Only when I worked on the mines was a really aware of the situation for black people in this country. Then I had to work with black people. Then I became aware that they thought differently to me, that they ate different food to me, that they didn't go home to the same houses. I mean I knew that it existed because I grew up, obviously with a maid. My mother had a maid. I would speak to her. But I never went to her house. I never met her children unless she brought them to my mother's house. The location to me was some other place. I only really became exposed to it at a very late stage, when I was in my twenties.

Apartheid has been totally successful. When I really experienced it was with my cousin, my nephew actually. They live in Zululand and Clinton grew up with the maid's kids. And when his mother came home from work.....they had to go to work, and they had to leave their children with the maid in order to earn the money that they needed. And so the shock came when.....well it wasn't even a shock it was actually a terrific, I thought it was terrific. Their child couldn't really relate to them in their own language because he would go off in Zulu. And that is terrific. And he used to run up and show them things that they didn't even know. He used to get out of the car and run up to lift up the doormat before they went into the house because he had been taught that there are snakes that will crawl underneath the doormat to escape the heat. And those little things actually a kid like that is lucky to have, I think. Because he grows up in a situation where he doesn't know about apartheid. He doesn't know about discrimination. He identifies the black kids he plays with as his friends. He is not taught in any way that those kids are bad people.

And I have seen the exact same situation recently in South West Africa when I lived with a nature conservationist. And their kid

Daniel, grew up, and he was 3 years old when I first met him. And the only kids he know were the maid's little kids. And the toy that he had was an old car tire. And he would role these car tires down the hill and play very happily with these kids. And suddenly his father was transferred to Capetown, and for the first time he was confronted just with white people and white kids. And his father would buy him toys in shops because now he would go into town. And he would get him toys. The first confrontation that occurred was when the little white kids that he played with took away these toys very selfishly and wouldn't let him play with them and they were his own toys. And he couldn't identify with these kids. And when they went into the supermarket, he would run to the black teller and hug her because he would identify with her. And that is proof of it, totally in my eyes.

For me, the mines, it was a totally new world, being around blacks. I couldn't speak their language, so I couldn't get through to them. I have always wanted to learn to speak a black language and it has been terribly difficult for me to. And some of my best friends which I came to identify with, trusted me....Black people actually trusted me where they didn't trust other white people. They couldn't tell them the things they wanted to tell them. And this came through, in a way, rebelling at school. When we used to smoke. To be able to smoke, you had to be able to go into the locations to get it. And to be able to go into the locations to get it, you had to establish trust. But not only that, it was quite fearful to go in there at nighttime to get it. You could be stabbed, you could be robbed. But once you reached the merchant's place where you had to get it, you felt in a way secure with these people. Smoking with them almost formed an identity. It seemed quite strange, but that is almost how it came about for me

I've established richer contacts since then because of the music scene which I am very keen on. And I think Johnny Cleg, who I came to know quite well, really proved that, he proved it wholeheartedly, in the richness that he got out of getting to know a black guy. And that black guy actually gave him a lot more than Johnny was able to give back. This is Jaluka.

I have a black friend, Scorpion, and I love his music. And I will go all over town to find out where he is playing and to talk to him and for him to take me to his place. And he told me about life in Alexandria Township, which is just up the road from where I was brought up.

I feel I should be doing social documentary work. Vortreeker road is the project I would want to take on. It runs from Salt River right through to Franshoek. It is a dead straight road and goes through colored areas, black areas, Afrikaans areas, elite white areas. I mean the cross section on one street, a dead straight road....I want to do the people and Robin wants to do the architecture. I just need a sponsorship for that. I have always had that and that is why I took on this project on leisure time.

Photography takes you out, and it takes you to meet people, and given the way you live, you have got to be exposed, you have got to expose yourself to it and then you can expose other people to it,

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which is also the ultimate role of teaching. }>

There should be more photographers out there. Documentary can, in a way, prove a lot of things. I mean it is proving it now. This whole ban on photography is crazy, really crazy. Because there are a lot of people out there who are exploiting it. Which you will get in all spheres of photography because it is so vast. Advertising exploits it as well. Photographers have such a terrible name because a photographer is a photographer to the general public. This is also why people have such a problem identifying good photographs. What is it? How do they read it? If you are on this side of the camp you are saying that. If you are saying this on the one side and a person doesn't agree with it, then he doesn't agree that it is a good photograph. This is what I see about my whole dissertation thing.

People here can only see one straight, narrow minded, keyhole approach to photography. That's the problem. Maybe that's what it's got to be. A straight thing. You have got to hone in it. But it isn't that simple. [You are dealing with reality which goes...like your feelings one day, you are down and then you are up. It is a balance. It is a pulse it goes up and down, it beats and it must beat with life, it must flow with it. And I can photograph and photograph and photograph and I'll do that until I'm finished photographing which is when I'll die, when I can't see anymore. I believe that. I believe that I must leave something behind me. I am not saying I believe in this party or I believe in that struggle. Every person, individually struggles. And every person individually hopes. And you can see that in every person you meet. One moment you catch them in that moment, and the next time another.] It depends.

Omar: You and I want to teach people what is happening around us. I call it propoganda and you call it documentary photography.

Mike: Well, in a way.

Omar: you want to teach, to propogate.

Mike: But I want to teach other means of photography. I want to teach people how to use the medium sucessfully, technically as well. So it becomes so much easier for them. They can get al the technical parts behind them and get out there.

Omar: So Ideologically it means the same thing.

Mike: Yea.

[There is no other country where I want to be at this stage. We have such a struggle ahead of us, and we are going to continue to struggle. This situation that we are in is going to be in no way easy. It is not going to be solved in my lifetime. It is not going to be solved in my children's lifetime either. It is going to have to change when we start with our children and their children and everybody's children growing up together in unity, in equal situations, so that there is no in-bred thing, that people are different. Because they are not different.] I grew up that in-bred thing. But I was lucky that I went

to a private school and that private school never discriminated. I mean it was forced down our throats that we were very privileged, all the time. I never felt myself being privileged the fact that I was white. I felt privileged the fact that I was sent to get a good education. But I didn't identify with that. There seemed to be other things which were more important. The streets were more important. And I never spent any time on the streets. People who went to other kinds of schools where there are not even classrooms, they spend all their time on the streets. They grow up on the streets. They are exposed to things at a far earlier age than I was. I lived a very sheltered existence as a kid. I did. I can't deny that. I was very privileged. I never went hungry. And that is the case for the majority of white people in this country. But I think it is going to change. And I would like to see it change.

And now, knowing that I left home seven years ago, I've been on my own since then. I wouldn't say that I was in a bourgeois environment. I could be rich. I could go and do advertising photography. I see how much money you can make there. I see how you can exploit people. I see the capitalist side of it. I see how I'm exploited when I work for people like that. And I actually come home from days like that and my photography is divorced from me. I might as well be drafting. I might as well have stayed an engineer. Because that is not what my photography is about, even though I am using a camera. It is not the same thing. There is not way it is the same thing. And every day I keep telling myself that. I can't change things now because of the financial situaion. I mean, I need to eat, I need to keep the rent man away from the door. But if a point comes up where I can get a retainer for lecturing, then I would take that, and I would go out and do what I intend to do. It is the only way. Continue with my darkroom. I mean I don't even use that darkroom for what it is supposed to be used for. And I don't want to use that darkroom to print up photographs of cars. That is not what that thing was built for. No I must make stories. Not stories, but facts. I mean they will be stories and essays in a way. I think that that is where it lies. Very definitely. That is the true role of photography: to work in very close relationship with a person who can write very well, and write up history. Because it is now when things are happening. And it won't always be like that. In fifty years time those stories won't be there. And your work will be there to show people how it is and how it is going to be. Think, think think. You can only think things. That is what you are taught to do. That is what I was taught to do. That is why I was lucky to go to St John's I suppose, to utilize that. You must educate people otherwise there is going to be no hope of change. You can't force it. You can't make things and say "'Look, see that's what it is."

[People don't want to look. You have got to start from yourself. You have to go out there and mix with those people, eat with them, dance with them if they want to dance. Run with them. You have to. That is what life is. And if you do that, your life and your day will never be dull, which I don't intend it to be, and it is right now." No, it is.]

Photography
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DAVIS

Future of
S.A - !!
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Robert
Photog
DAVIS