



More than black and white

He started taking pictures in 1948 and his iconic images have captured the stark reality of apartheid and its legacy. Aspasia Karras speaks to legendary South African photographer David Goldblatt whose black and white photos of Jo'burg embody the country we live in

Words Aspasia Karras
Photographs David Goldblatt

Left Refugees from Zimbabwe sheltering in the Central Methodist Church on Pritchard Street, in the city. 22 March 2009

MARY
DEEP-
TOASTE
FOR
DEEP-DOWN SATIS





Jozi – my infernal, infuriating, wild harlot of a town. She drips with occasional beauty when her streets are paved with jacaranda blossoms and highveld storms break out across her polluted koppies but mostly she just drips with irony and fools' gold. A Johnny-come-lately place – if she doesn't gobble you up for breakfast she will crown you queen of the mine dump for at least a day. I love her irrationally, but she's not for sissies.

I am thinking, or rather, I am feeling all these things as I sit with David Goldblatt and peer at his laptop screen. He is showing me his body of work that will be exhibited at the Goodman Gallery in October. This is his evolving chronicle of our maddening city: past, present and germinating future. By extension it's the story of our lives.

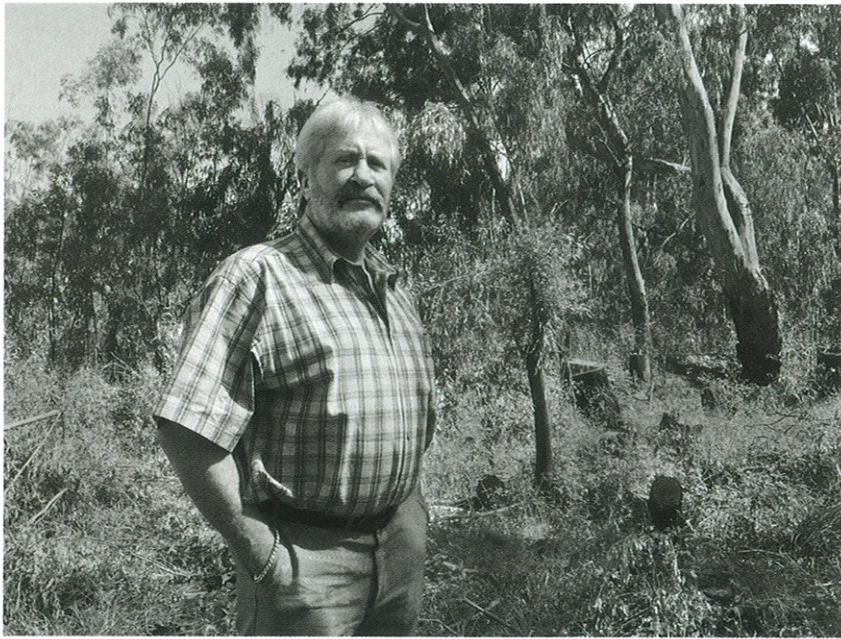
'Photography is not simply a matter of showing things I have done,' he tells me, 'but rather showing the things that

I find him intensely focused, a precise deployer of hard facts, possessed of a cutting insight into the South African psychic landscape

have become important to me.' And what is important to him ever since he picked up a camera more than half a century ago is to accurately depict the aching truths of our flawed nation.

Joseph Lelyveld, in his *New York Review of Books* article about Goldblatt's 2010 New York exhibition, says: 'As a photographer, Goldblatt's distinctive way has always been to go deeper, to find an oblique angle that went right to the heart of the matter: an image bespeaking loneliness, stunted aspiration, fragile pride on both sides of the racial divide, not infrequently with an intimation of imminent violence or its result.' There is something essential in every shot, a quality acknowledged by the global photographic community, who honoured him with the 2006 Hasselblad

Above In a department store, probably John Orr's, on Von Brandis Street. June 1965
Opposite Woman in the Coronation Restaurant, Diagonal Street Fruit Market. January 1962



Top Born in 1948, Hennie Gerber was 16 when he joined the South African Police. He became a dog handler working with Security Police on the Botswana border and then served with the Murder and Robbery squad, where he 'experienced ... techniques of interrogation which included various forms of coercion and torture'.* After eight years he resigned and joined a private security company, Fidelity Guards, as Group Security Manager. On 27 March 1991, men with AK47s robbed the company's Jo'burg premises of R4,5-million. Gerber believed that this was a PAC operation and an inside job. He suspected an employee, Samuel Kganakga, for this and an additional theft of R60 000. When he didn't yield to questioning, Gerber had Kganakga taken to a remote place near Heriotdale where he was suspended from a tree by his feet. His genitals and hands were electrically shocked and a fire was lit beneath his head so that he would inhale smoke. Gerber, two other white ex-policemen and two black employees questioned him.

With brief respites he was suspended for about eight hours without refreshment. 'There was liquor in my car and we started drinking. During these ... interrogations alcohol is always used. No right-thinking person can act in this way without your conscience plaguing you.* Kganakga denied all knowledge of the robberies. He was eventually taken down, shot in the shoulder by Gerber's colleague, Oosthuizen, and then shot and killed by Gerber. The body was burnt. Gerber was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for murder. He applied for amnesty to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the grounds that he had acted in pursuit of the fight against terrorism. The application was refused on the grounds that there was no evidence of a political motive for the killing. Gerber served 14 years and is now a private investigator.

* Gerber in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, amnesty hearing, Pretoria, June 1996

Photography Award and the Henri Cartier-Bresson award in 2009.

Here is an apocalyptic scene of a sleeping congregation of Zimbabwean refugees, spread over every available surface of the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg. In deep slumber, they look awfully vulnerable – I suppose this is the true state of Mugabe's exiled flock. 'It's totally unacceptable that a country like ours should allow what happens in Zimbabwe, and that we should treat people like this,' says Goldblatt as I stare at the image.

A woman sits alone in the Coronation Restaurant, fagged out by her day, slightly tarnished by life.

A white child holds up a black man with a toy gun. The man looks discomfited as he plays along – a hostage to circumstantial irony. That kid has long since grown up and in more recent photos his ex-convict adult counterparts glare furtively from the scenes of their crimes. They seem at once ashamed and semi-defiant.

Even the aerial shots of a vast new complex being developed in the north west of Jo'burg and the symmetrically opposed ant hill of Diepsloot, a post-1994 squatter camp, are tellingly human. On the only patch of unfenced grass in the midst of the tightly packed housing complex, or 'future slum' as Goldblatt describes it, sits a family picnicking in the sun, miniscule in the bottom right-hand corner of the picture. 'Gauteng province

Bottom Born in Soweto in 1979, Paul Lerato Tuge's mother was pregnant with him when his father went to prison for 15 years for robbery. Brought up by his grandmother, who was hardly able to feed him, Paul began house-breaking at 13 and at 14 was dependent on drugs and drink. In 2001, after he and a friend broke into a house in Benoni in which he stole a pistol, a neighbour's gardener reported them and they were arrested. With the stolen pistol Paul shot and wounded one policeman and possibly a second; they then escaped and hid in this stormwater gully. When they heard dogs, they surrendered. Paul was sentenced to 20 years for two attempted murders. On appeal he was acquitted of one charge and his sentence was reduced to 12 years of which he served six. He underwent intensive rehabilitation in prison. He has founded a company called Dream Finders in which he hopes to employ fellow ex-offenders 'because it's hard to find a job if you have a criminal record'. 18 February 2010



Hold-up in Hillbrow.
November 1963



BUS STOP

35

FIRE POTATOES
125

FRESH VEGETABLES

IVA ZEMO
SLECC BEANIES
EUROPEANS ONLY



*Slegs Blankes Europeans
Only bus stop, Derby Road,
Lorentzville. December 1973*



spent R90-million on Miss World, which would have paid for a stormwater drainage system for Diepsloot. Such a lack of proportion – it's ridiculous,' he points out.

Goldblatt tells me that in his old age he is becoming increasingly grumpy. I find him intensely focused, a precise deployer of hard facts, possessed of a cutting insight into the South African psychic landscape and yes, despite his innate charm, a little bit grumpy. I think he expected a whole lot better from us all. After unrelentingly recording the misery of the apartheid state for the better part of his life, in what he calls his 'soft period', I suspect he was hoping that post 1994, in his seventh and eighth decades, he could lighten up. I imagine he was hoping to hop into his customized travelling truck and ease up on the heavy questions as he criss-crossed the country shooting in full colour.

No such luck. I fear his gimlet eye cannot help but seek out the cracks and fissures in our 'rainbow nation'.

'I am angry,' he says. 'We have f-cked up another generation of people needlessly. As if Bantu Education was not damaging enough, we have reproduced another education system that has created a generation that is unfit for the modern technological world. I believe this reflects in our crime levels. There is no opportunity to become upwardly mobile.' Hence his work photographing ex-criminals at the scenes of their crimes, which is his main project right now and is entirely not for profit. I ask if his use of black and white is deliberate. 'Yes it's quite deliberate – colour is too easy for what I am feeling.'

Still, despite his anger, there is something profoundly redeeming in his work. This city may be a bitch but we all still crowd in and nestle at her skirts. As Lelyveld puts it: 'The cumulative effect, the emotion most of these images elicit from the viewer, isn't indignation so much as sympathy for embattled individuals struggling for shelter and self-respect.' **mc** David Goldblatt's exhibition will be held at The Goodman Gallery in Jo'burg from 7 October to 6 November 2010. He will host two walkabouts discussing his work. For information call 011-788-1113 or visit Goodman-gallery.com.



Top A cluster-housing picnic in the city's north-west. 15 August 2009

Bottom Shacks in Diepsloot, a township of informal and formal housing north of the city, established in 1995 as a 'temporary' measure for people removed from other townships. It is now home - whether 'temporary' or otherwise is unclear - to about 150 000 people. 15 August 2009
Opposite Arriving family, King George Street. Circa 1955

'Gauteng province spent R90-million on Miss World, which would have paid for a stormwater drainage system for Diepsloot. Such a lack of proportion – it's ridiculous'

