

Sunday Times

Life *style*

September 26 2010

GOLD DIGGERS

Goldblatt and
Vladislavić on
life in Joburg



INSIDE TRAVEL & FOOD: Beirut — The Paris of the East

CULTURE

POSERS

A unique collaboration between photographer David Goldblatt and novelist Ivan Vladislavić, *TJ/Double Negative* combines a book of Goldblatt's photographs of Johannesburg taken over 60 years and a novel by Vladislavić, which tells the story of a young man

awakened to the paradoxes and possibilities of photography. The project brings together two of the country's foremost artists in a conversation between images and text that reflects the ever-changing spirit of the city and its people. This is an extract from the novel

I HAD a look around with Mrs Ditton at my shoulder. Jimmy's room was easy to spot: he had a Kawasaki poster on the door and Farrah Fawcett-Majors above the bed. The room smelt of fish. In the channel between the bed and the wall lay a clutter of flippers, tanks and masks crusted with sea sand, and a couple of wetsuits like bloated body parts. A speargun leaned against a wardrobe. Jimmy was a diver in Port Nolloth, his mother told me, but he'd been called up to the border again and so he'd brought his gear home.

Couldn't leave it in Port Jolly, it would all be swiped. He loved the sea, she said, even as a baby you couldn't get him out of the water. Swimming before he could walk. It was a crying shame they wouldn't take him in the navy because of his feet.

Auerbach called her for the shot.

The main bedroom was as gloomy as the lounge. A pair of brogues, side by side under the bed, polished for a funeral. The suit they went with was on a round-shouldered dumb valet. Through a window, I saw the window of the house next door, almost close enough to touch and so perfectly aligned it might have been a reflection. I shifted aside the edge of a net curtain and saw that the window opposite had venetian blinds tilted against the outside world. I could not imagine what was going on in that room. Anything was possible. Everything.

When I returned to the lounge, Auerbach had the focusing cloth over his head. For a moment, the darkness seemed to emanate from him, running out from under the stifling hood. Then the flow reversed and the cloth appeared to be soaking up the shadows that had lain there already. Mrs Ditton sat in the armchair beside the fireplace. The coffee table had been dragged away — there is no trace of it in the photograph — to expose the floorboards and a corner of the rug. Looming on the left is the largest of the cabinets, so imposing you would say it belongs in a department store.

The chair has wooden arms with ledges for teacups and on each of these lies a pie-crust of crochet work and a coaster. The chair sprawls with its arms open wide and its fists clenched, and she wallows in its lap.

Auerbach shrugged off the cloth and stood beside the camera with the cable release in his hand. The shadows scuttled and settled again. He waited for something to happen. Or not happen. Something imperceptible to the rest of us had to become clear before he could release the shutter.

Twice he stepped away from the camera and looked towards the door with a grimace, as if the situation pained him and he had made up his mind to leave. This caused her to look at the door enquiringly as if someone had just knocked.

I imagined the door opening, I imagined the room opening rather than the door, the door standing still while the house swung away on small hinges and closed into the eye of the camera with a bang. Patience, something is bound to happen. And if nothing does? That is unthinkable. We cannot be left here in this half-formed state.

While my thoughts were elsewhere, Auerbach took the picture. For only the second time that day, the shutter fell through the moment like a guillotine. You can see the relief on Mrs Ditton's face as she drops from the fulness of life into a smaller, diminished immortality. She looks grateful to have the air knocked out of her. Anticipating a paper-thin future, she floats free of the fat-thighed cushions and the sticky shadows, she levitates. It is there in the photograph, you have only to look.

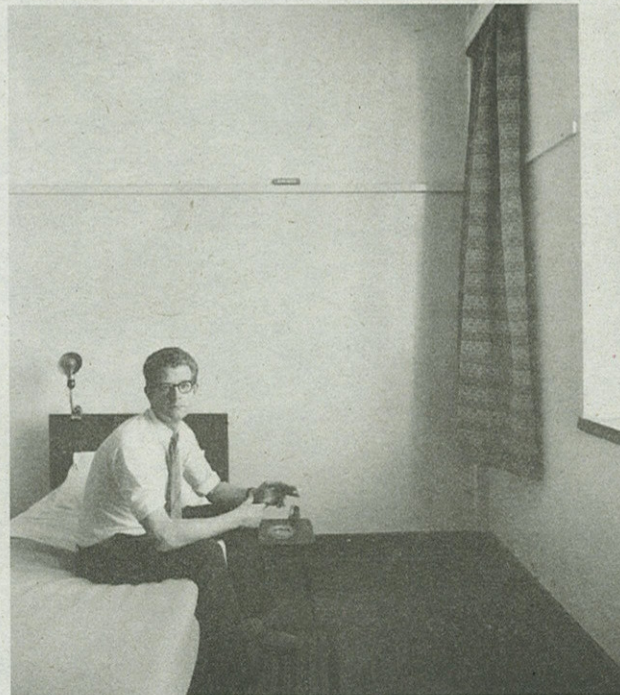
For a moment after the picture was taken, she was reluctant to leave the chair. Captured and released in the same instant, she was unsure of her will. She had two destinies now. One of them she still occupied, the other had stepped away from her; it was receding into the past, but with its face turned to the future. She hovered in the chair, unblinking, afraid to move a muscle, as if stirring would smudge that other body in the camera and she needed to match it for as long as possible to preserve a resemblance.

I went on to the stoep and fired up my old man's briar. Through the bay window, I had a new view of the lounge. Standing there alone, the camera looked like a detached observer, an expert on a fact-finding mission, with its chin up and its eye steady, drawing its own conclusions.

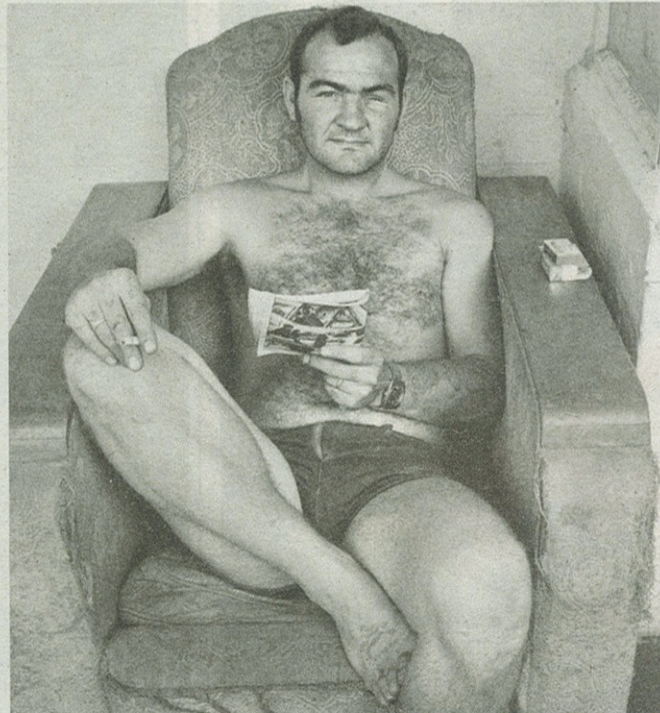
● *TJ/Double Negative* is published by Umuzi in October, R1 000. An exhibition of David Goldblatt's photographs runs at The Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg from October 7 to November 6.



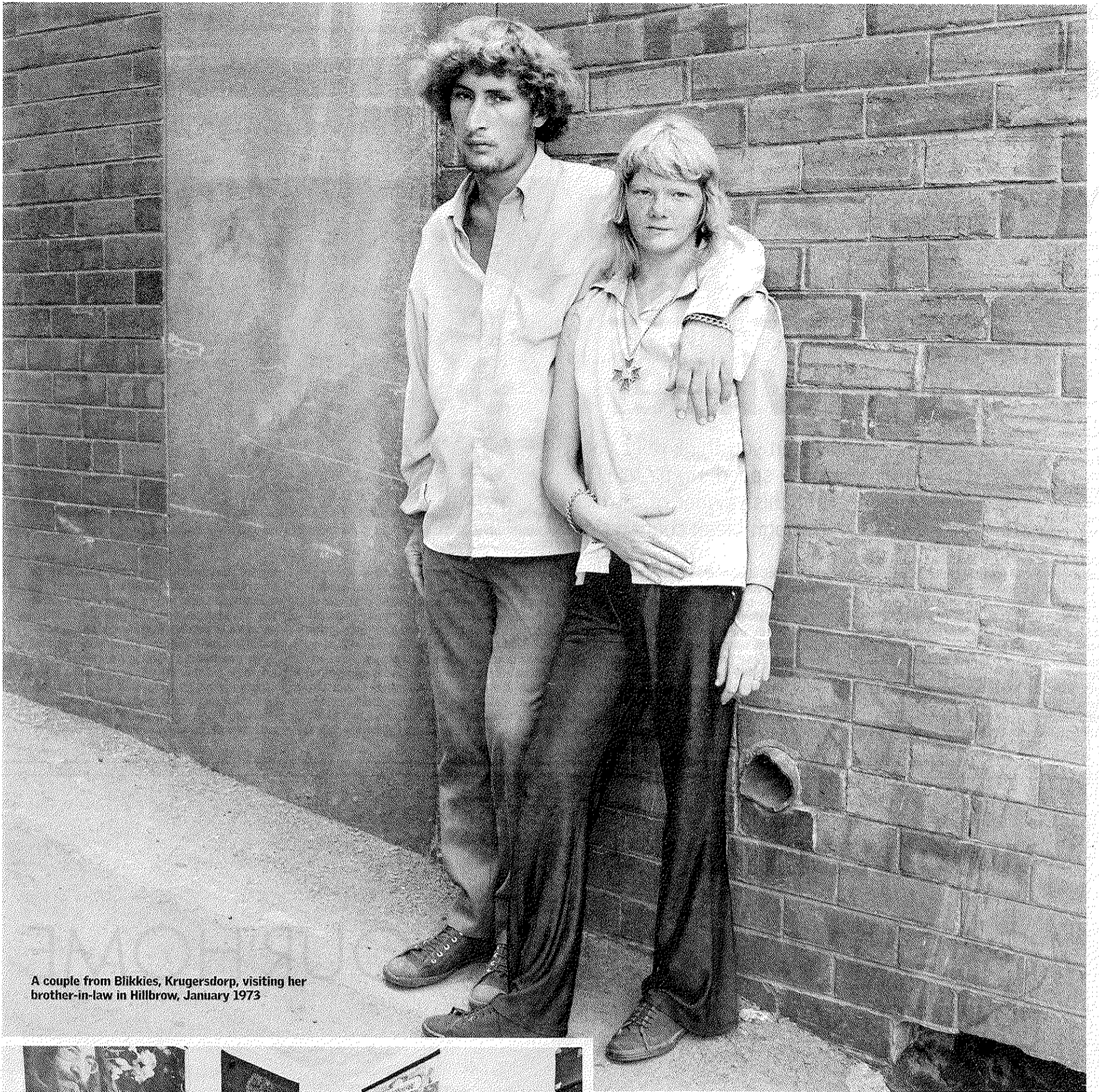
A woman in her parlour, Bezuidenhout Valley, November 1973



JM Dippenaar, municipal official, in his apartment in Bree Street, in the city, 1973



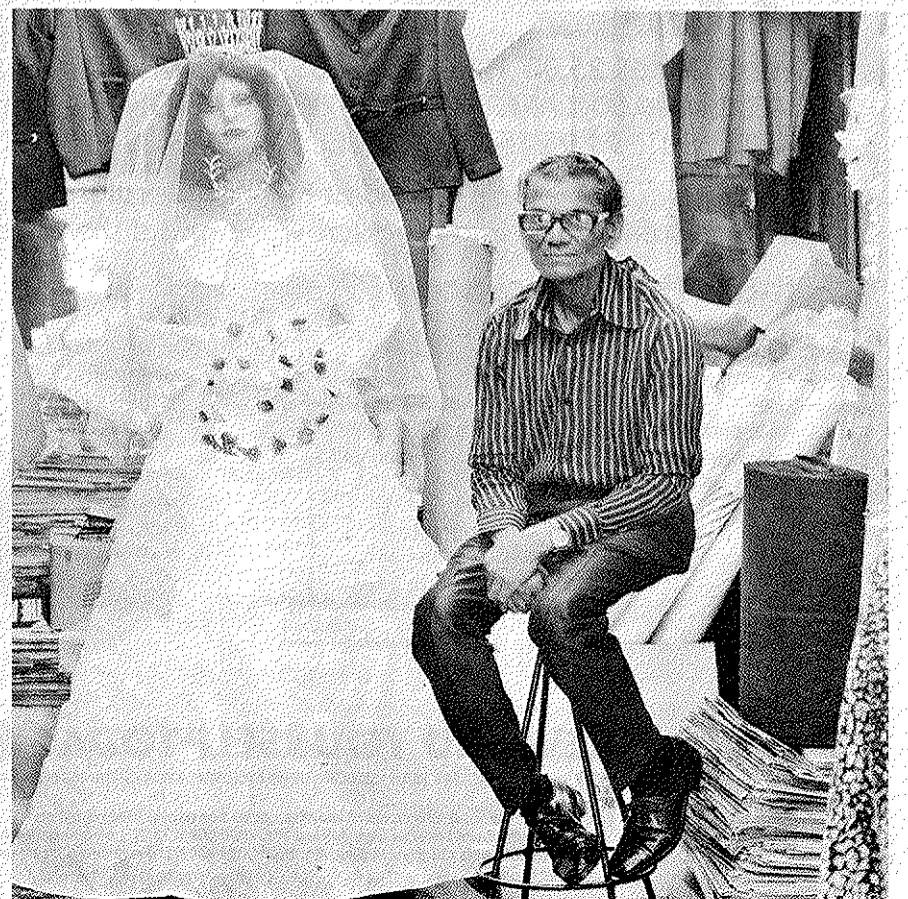
A house-painter, Pretoria Street, Hillbrow, January 1973



A couple from Blikkies, Krugersdorp, visiting her brother-in-law in Hillbrow, January 1973



Friends, in a rooming house on Abel Road, Hillbrow, March 1973



Dawood Fakir Surtee in his store on Delaray Street, Fietas, 1976