



In the afternoon at Marabastad terminal in Pretoria, commuters start lining up for buses to take them back home to KwaNdebele 1983, Silver gelatin photograph on fibre-based paper, approx. 30 x 40cm, Edition of 10



In a department store, probably John Orr's on Von Brandis Street, Johannesburg 1965, Silver gelatin photograph on fibre-based paper, approx. 30 x 40cm, Edition of 10

## The Pursuit of Values

While renowned photographer David Goldblatt pursues subjects that reveal the values of our society, Neil Dundas, curator of *The Pursuit of Values*, turns the frame on the principles of Goldblatt himself.

'It's not a retrospective,' says Neil Dundas, curator of a show of David Goldblatt's photographs destined for the Standard Bank Gallery beginning in October. Goldblatt, arguably South Africa's foremost photographer, has simply produced too much work over the last 64 years to make this possible. However, says Dundas, *The Pursuit of Values* 'is a really good survey of the periods of his work,' spanning several decades, and including many images never before published.

One of these is a photo essay of the Transkei, shot by Goldblatt in 1975, which Dundas describes as 'a real time capsule. People don't live like that any more, not even in the Transkei.'

'I also looked at my first attempts at photographing Afrikaners who were people of the plots, smallholdings

outside Randfontein,' says Goldblatt, describing the process of selecting images for the show. 'And then also a small group of photographs from Gamkaskloof, in the Swartberg mountains. A major part of the exhibition is devoted to what I've called *Structures of Dominion and Democracy*, a continuation of what I did in the 1980s and 90s: I photographed structures in South Africa as expressions of our values, and I've been doing the same thing in post-apartheid SA for some time.'

'You very quickly get a sense that these architectural studies are far more than just looking at the building or the structure,' notes Dundas of *Structures*. 'They're really looking at us... they are a good guide to the sorts of things that have guided us as a nation. And yes, some of it is negative: the greed, or the sense of dominion; the sort of





*Boorgat is die Antwoord, De Brak, on the Fraserburg-Sutherland road*  
2007, Digital print on 100% cotton rag paper, A0 or A0+, Edition of 10



*Sarie Fink doing her hair, Kleine Rivier, Buffelsdrif, Western Cape*  
2004, Digital print on 100% cotton rag paper, A0 or A0+, Edition of 10

powerhouse architecture and sometimes rather alarmingly new brutalist architecture of the republic. But also beautiful things – from Hindu temples to the kind of tiny towns that were founded around magnificent and sometimes very surprising churches, which must have cost more than the rest of the village to build. All very much about the way people have attached value and emotion to the place they've found and called home, the kinds of places they've grown up in. The family values that would lead to a compound or a particular kind of clan village.'

Goldblatt describes his selection of these structures as 'very arbitrary. Some of these I've known about and gone there deliberately to look at them. Some of them I've come across

quite randomly. I quite often drive into particular areas of the country and then look at what is there.' Although his work inevitably carries a story, with the history and significance of the subject adding its shades to the power of the image, he notes that he prefers not to do research beforehand. 'I work rather instinctively, and I find that research gets in the way if I have formed predigested ideas,' he says. 'Generally speaking, I look at things and respond to them by the way they provoke or irritate or excite me – if I am, and photograph them, I then frequently do research afterwards.'

Goldblatt's particular gift seemingly lies in this sensibility, an awareness of something latent in a subject, and his ability to reveal it to his audience. Dundas, speaking

of his interaction with Goldblatt's work over time, describes a kind of awakening, a visual education. 'He makes me see things that I didn't even realise were there – or he makes me look again, and somehow see, *really* see, what I was looking at. I suppose in lots of ways that's the test of a really good photographer... that in the composition of the picture... the play with light and shadow and dark, and maybe waiting for some places to be empty, and others to be populated before photographing them, they make a particular point.'

Or, in Goldblatt's case, not so much a point as a nuanced whole, an openness to the other side of the story and the inevitably convoluted quality of human beings. 'We live in a country where, if you'll pardon the pun, things are so black

and white,' says Dundas. Goldblatt's work provides a critical counterpoint to this, any neat division of saints and sinners, victim and oppressor. 'David has developed a fondness for all of us in our foibles,' he says. '... I think what he would call that sense of being open to what the other person's story really is, instead of just judging it on the preconceived notion, or on the appearance that the camera can capture.' (A peculiar contradiction: Goldblatt uses photography, seemingly dealing in appearances, to take us beyond a surface reading). Perhaps this is why, at the height of the apartheid struggle, Goldblatt avoided the scenes of open violence and township struggle sought out by the likes of the more stridently activist Afrapix and the Bang Bang Club,





*The City, The Firewalker and the aftermath of copper cable theft. Queen Elizabeth bridge, Johannesburg, 29 December 2011*  
2011, Silver gelatin on fibre-based paper, 45 x 53.5cm, Edition of 10

choosing instead to focus on seemingly mundane subjects. In a shoot-out, things slot easily into neat 'black and white' categories. It is in the everyday that the full, human complexity of a situation is revealed.

This fascination with complexity may also explain Goldblatt's interest in South African authors, whom he cites as his main influences. 'Nadine Gordimer, particularly her earlier work; Herman Charles Bosman; Barney Simon; Lionel Abrahams; Marlene van Niekerk; Karel Schoeman; Ndjabulo Ndebele; John Coetzee,' he lists. 'Very often the writing of these people has made me wish to extend my observations or look deeper into things than I would perhaps otherwise have done, because they have enlightened me or excited me or opened my eyes. And so, yes, they have been very influential:

Herman Charles Bosman's ability to use very simple stories, and very simple language, to say complex things, often with deep irony. Nadine Gordimer, particularly in her early work, lived the same sort of Witwatersrand life that I lived and was very familiar with. John Coetzee, in a number of his books, has plumbed the depths. Marlene van Niekerk – I just find her work extraordinarily evocative and stimulating.'

It also explains his emphasis on the importance of his captions. 'I don't regard the photographs that I do as being conceived in a vacuum. Each exists in this place, at this time, and so, the facts connected with them are very important to me, and I generally at least try to give the basic journalistic knowledge: what, why, where and when. But also, quite often by choosing the words very carefully, one



*Suburban garden, Bloubergstrand and Table Bay, Cape Town. 9 January 1986*  
1986, Silver gelatin photograph on fibre-based paper, approx. 30 x 40cm, Edition of 10

can subtly – or not so subtly – direct the viewer's attention to a particular way of looking at that photograph.' Dundas notes that over the years, Goldblatt has altered his captions – they are sometimes longer, sometimes very basic. For his work photographing convicted criminals at the scene of their crimes, the captions form a particularly crucial attachment, providing a short biography or background to the crime. Sometimes, these reveal an act brought about by desperation; at others, 'the banality of bad character. Bad nature,' as Dundas puts it.

*The Pursuit of Values* marks the first major show of Goldblatt's work in Johannesburg in a while, although he has had a number of big exhibitions overseas in the interim. It is accompanied by a catalogue/book, which includes an essay by

academic Patricia Hayes. While Goldblatt 'resists the idea of the show being a homage,' says Dundas, 'he views himself as the means to hopefully helping us to understand ourselves as a country better, and I think that the show does that very well.'

'I think there are lots of new discoveries in a show like this,' he says. 'For anyone that has been interested in photography as a technical component of the arts and the evolution of that as a skill, and for anyone who's been interested in South Africa's changes and shifts, and the historical leading to the new, both the exhibition and the publication will be really eye opening.'

*The Pursuit of Values opens at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg on 22 October, and runs until the 5 December 2015. CF*