

Conversation with Gideon Mendel in Cape Town, November, 1985
Omar Badsha comes in on page 5

I grew up in Johannesburg. But I came down to Cape Town for four years in the University, a bachelor of Arts, majoring in psychology and in current African History. I began working a bit in photography about my second or third year at the University. But I think quite.... My impression in retrospect is that my work there was quite pretentious. I was very into rock and abstractions. I wasn't doing very much.

and I lost an interest in taking photographs for quite a few years, didn't really do very much work after that until 1983. I finished the University in 1980, then taught for a year in a high school. I taught English, and history. I then worked in Johannesburg and worked in the film industry there. I worked in film editing. I just, photographically, when I was in Johannesburg, I was shooting quite a lot of transparencies, but I wasn't doing very much documentary work. I came back to Cape Town at the end of that year, and got a job working for a film company in Cape Town and, a friend of mine had just got a darkroom, and I began doing things in black and white. It just took off and carried me away with it.

I began shooting stuff. At that time there were quite big demolitions in crossroads, people were living out there and I went out there, and had quite a feeling of horror, really horrified by what I saw, and translated that into photographic images. I just wandered out there on my own. I had photographed people in the streets before, but I just wandered into this situation. In that situation, it was really quite moving. I went out and think made quite a connection with people there.

I left my job at the film company. I was doing a bit of free lance film processing as well and I had a bit of money which I inherited so I decided to go and try and take pictures, and write as well, and became involved then, was drawn into, the KDC squatter camp. Then it was just an empty piece of land. And there was incredible overcrowding and there had been a number of squatter camps that previously had been bulldozed. Those were the days when they used to bulldoze squatter camps in Cape Town. And a lot of people just moved onto another piece of land and began building shacks. There was quite an organized resistance to lack of housing and there was quite a protracted struggle as the people moved in and the police then moved in and knocked down the shacks. In the months going in to winter, people were standing up to them, built shacks at night, tore them down in the morning. It was quite a struggle. I was actually asked by the people to photograph in that situation.

Just seeing a lot of being in that place and having shacks torn down (takes a long time), kids that would spend rainy nights in the open. I just felt very strongly about it. At that time I had problem, because I didn't have any kind of accreditation, which one needs to have to actually be in the area. So I got thrown out quite a lot by the police. Police would be moving into an area, and I would arrive and they caught me in an area and threw me out. But the kind of

things, one of the experiences that affected me very strongly, I was with another journalist, she actually drew me in, she was working in radio at the time and she thought of me and drew me in. We went out very early in the morning, just before sunrise. And the people had been in the open all night. And we parked at a house across the road, and ran into the house, ducked in there. The Police were actually around. To get us across the road, they put blankets around us and got us in. Then we were surrounded by these people. I photographed them and then some police actually arrived. But they covered us. And the police never saw us. That is the kind of experience which drew me back.

For personal reasons.....and my parents live in London, and for various reasons, I decided to go over there for a while. And something which I was considering very seriously was actually studying photography. I decided I want to pursue that. So I applied to a program in London and actually went over and spent some time in London. But I found out after actually getting accepted into courses, then.....After putting a lot of energy in time in filling out application forms and putting a portfolio together, I was accepted and decided I really didn't want to study. Actually I wanted to go back to South Africa.

Something in me was crying out to go back and ...my work was here. A lot of my family lived overseas, a lot of friends and connections, and before I had left S.Africa, I thought very seriously of getting some training, some photographic training. I had always thought I lacked the technical knowledge to do really good work. So I was overseas for about nine months. I came back about December, 1983.

I had heard about the Carnegie thing. I had made contact and met with Paul Weinberg and various people. I had heard about it and wanted very much to work on it. So I came back to Cape Town and contacted Omar and Wilfred and I had also, in the time when I had been working before in Cape Town, and my girlfriend had been living in Haut Bay, and in fact, I had always had quite a connection with Haut Bay. My sister had lived there beforehand. And my parents told me, in summer we used to always go on family holidays to Haut Bay, when I was a kid. I was actually conceived in Haut Bay!

I actually worked on the community as a whole. I did quite a lot of work. There is quite a big squatter community there and a harbor village, a harbor community. And there is also a migrant compound. I photographed all those places.

This top strip here, this picture here is from the migrant compounds, black workers who work in the fish industry. Some of those pictures.....I also photographed in some white farms....I had a very good connection in the area, in the village, a guy called Dick who had been doing political work there. They kind of wanted evidence of the bad conditions, photographs, so I worked with him and he took me around. That helped a lot. I photographed his wedding after that.

There was also quite a connection with that one squatter family I photographed. The story on that is that my girlfriend's cousin lives,

and runs a nursery in Haut Bay, and she lived there for a while. There was one particular squatter camp very close to the nursery, and I got to know those people quite well. They loved being photographed. I would go there and it was like I was the piper, with kids behind me.

At that point I was having financial problems, and I wasn't getting much work in Cape Town. We were in Haut Bay then. And a friend of mine at that time was working for a newspaper in Johannesburg. I had always had a feeling for the moment, for action. There was one picture which I had a fight with Omar about because I felt it should have been included. It was one of my favorite pictures, about four guys dancing, with big shadows.....

Eventually you just take for granted that presence of the state over your shoulder. I have always had the protection of escape. I think particularly for myself, it is related to my position, to my family background. My parents were both refugees from Nazi Germany. My grandparents on my father's side actually died in the concentration camps. A lot of family friends and relatives died in Germany. So in a sense that is subconscious, in the background all the time for me. For myself, and I do feel very strongly that the average Jewish person, with the memory of that so recently in our history, it is quite a crime for us what is going on in this country.

I had liberal parents, who were always quite scared of the future in this country. I went to a very liberal school. At that point there were no multi-racial schools, but that school is now multi-racial. It is a school called INAUDIBLE, it's a very elite school with some very liberal teachers. I certainly remember some quite strong history lessons in school about Soweto and all that.

For myself at the moment, I've been working in news in various contexts for about the last year and a half, and haven't been able to focus as strongly on documentary photography. It is a very debatable point, but I do feel that, in terms of what has happened in the last few months, documentary photography is very different from what it was two years ago when I was working in Haut Bay. There has been so much violence, that the society has gone into an abnormal, perpetual conflict with the state. It is quite hard to explain. In this conflict, documentary photography is quite difficult, photographing communities, photographing people. And I'm not sure if there is a place for taking a documentary type photograph in a news type situation. I want to be able to do both.

I have become very badly addicted to news photography. And this is a problem. One gets an actual physical adrenalin addiction that you need to be where the action is, as a photographer and as a person. That sense of having to move quickly and think and the demands of an intense action news situation, it takes a lot of coordination. Just for example, this morning, there was a burning barricade and policemen put it out and a lot of kids appeared down the road and were calling and taunting police, and jeering the police. And we saw them and drove towards them. We crossed the road and jumped out of the car. There was this group of police cars coming up the road slowly. They stopped and

jumped out with their guns, and the rocks started flying. In that situation, I was having to decide where I am going to be and what I am going to focus on. There is a lot of luck involved. I ducked across the road and, just after I crossed the road, they began firing tear gas. A whole fusillade of rocks got thrown at them. I ducked next to some columns. They were firing over my head. I was in a position to get some pictures of them shooting. Though I think ideally, I would have been behind the rioters and gotten both of them in the picture. But just the adrenalin of that situation, it is maybe a half a minute of things happening, but it is danger and excitement and a sense of being on the edge of a confrontation, things like that. But as Omar can describe, it is a dangerous situation I've got into because I need to be there, and it is very hard to go back to the to the documentary stuff, while action is happening.

I've often wondered how different am I from the outside news photographers, am I just fitting in, in the same kind of situations? Am I shooting something different? And you find yourself in a situation.....I like to think I am there and doing it for more reasons, to be there to document the struggle and the atrocities which do happen.....INAUDIBLE It is certainly something I have been worried about, am I doing anything different from them?

I do work now as a full time photographer for Agence-France Press.

During the time I was working on the Carnegie stuff, I was fairly strung out and quite at a loss within myself during that period. And I was actually quite anguished about what I was doing and where I was going. And I feel that some of that feeling..... and I find that I was kind of reflecting that feeling in what I was photographing.

I've been working under such pressure, I haven't had the time to be able to worry about that. When I was working on the Star in Johannesburg, a daily news job, that what I shot was very similar to how I felt, what I was going through. I find strangely that I have been in a bad patch. And a good friend has come to stay with me who is very nice. And my work has changed and picked up because of it. I'm sure it is all related to one's subconscious. INAUDIBLE

I am stuck in the track of working for the news, for the international news machine. But it is a living, and it gets me around as well.

The one thing that is actually quite significant among the white photographers working in South Africa is actually the guilt ethic, the guilt syndrome. One grows as a white having a very comfortable, luxurious existence, while you are aware of all the pain and suffering and oppression which goes on around you. Maybe not on a conscious level, but possibly on an unconscious level, one should do this kind of work to alleviate that sense of guilt that sense of having so much amidst so much suffering.

BADSHA: When you work starts.....Among the writers, because among the writers, that to those writers has become bloody, sappy, liberal shit.

News
Photo
Addiction
Gideon

Guilt as
Motivator
Gideon

Doc photos
US News
Gideon
Addiction to
news photos
Gideon

Photographers document all the black shit, but are not prepared to document the white shit. Because it is very difficult for them to point that camera at the whites.

Mendel: Omar, I think being a black.....I've been doing a lot of work among the whites lately.

Badsha: I kept on saying to these guys, "You know nothing about the Jewish community in this country. We have all these bad stereotypes about them." And these Jews never want to go and point the camera at their own people.

Mendel: That is the one thing I am really resisting, doesn't appeal to me at all, in the least.

end of conversation.