

Exploration of mining taps into rich seams

Not only the subject, but also the approach and concerns of two renowned photographers lend weight to a new combined exhibition

Rory Bester

'On the mines." How familiar (or unfamiliar) is this phrase, following the worst police massacre in South African history since Sharpsville?

On the Mines was, given the popularity of the phrase, also the title of a book of photographs that David Goldblatt published in 1973. The book has now been republished in 2012 allowing its content a new context.

The double life of *On the Mines* has coincided with critical moments in the history of organised labour in South Africa. The Durban strikes in 1973, in terms of their reorganisation, rise and resistance to the state, were a turning point for the labour movement in South Africa. And the Marikana massacre, less than three months ago, was the bloody outcome of a strike that has overturned existing relationships among unions, mining companies and the state.

Most of the photographs were taken at gold mines on the Witwatersrand. But although they might be located on the mines and reveal the physical and psychological marks of mining on the Highveld landscape, Goldblatt's book is more importantly about the organisation of a system of labour in South Africa in the 1960s. It brings to the surface the artifice and order of the mine hierarchy by exploring the social and political nuances that have their foundation deep underground.

Goldblatt's interest in the mines was stimulated by the writing of Herman Charles Bosman and Nadine Gordimer and it bears the photographic influences of Bill Brandt and Sam Haskins. It is also circumscribed by Goldblatt's childhood life with (rather than on) the mines. Photographing them was an extension of this early memory.

The single-page reflection on his white childhood in Randfontein, included in the new second edition, published by Steidl, is a delicate moment that ties Goldblatt's own life to the life of the mines he represented and presented again.

It is this accumulation of the multi-

ple lives of things, continuously connected and disconnected, that forms the biography of the book itself.

The first life of *On the Mines* was at a time when critically conceived and realised books of photography did not exist. Ernest Cole's *House of Bondage*, published six years previously in New York and London, was immediately banned in South Africa and was consequently unavailable to all but a few local readers.

Despite a lack of any precedents for such readership, Goldblatt convinced Struik to print *On the Mines*, using a duotone process that, with the addition of a second colour, brought out the middle tones of the photographs. It is believed to be the first time this process was used in South Africa to print black-and-white photographs. It was also the first time Gordimer collaborated with anyone, even if it was not a proper collaboration — Goldblatt gave her a box of photographs, and she wrote her response quite independently.

In the original book, and perhaps not trusting the power of photographs, Goldblatt was driven by a need to be graphic and dramatic, using graininess and black backgrounds for visual effect. The second edition was an opportunity to counterbalance what he describes as these original "extremes". It now conforms to a classical style that Goldblatt subsequently established in 1975 with his second book, *Some Afrikaners Photographed* — a sparse caption on the left page and a photograph on the right page, a format he rarely deviated from until he began publishing his colour photographs in 2005.

The new *On the Mines* still has the same three chapters as the original, but it has 20 more photographs (31 were added and 11 were removed), and some are now in colour.

At the launch of the new edition Goldblatt said that it had taken him 40 years to come to terms with combining words and pictures, thereby giving the reader a fuller sense of the context he encountered whenever taking a photograph.

In books conceived after 1994 this has seen Goldblatt's extended cap-

tions sometimes swelling into short essays. But in the new edition he has largely remained true to the textual sparsity of the original. Some of the additional texts, such as *Second Thoughts* by Gordimer, seem irrelevant to the project as a whole.

Goldblatt shares the Goodman Gallery space with Alfredo Jaar, a Chilean-born artist whose interest is in the memory and memorialisation of human rights violations. The work he produced in response to the Rwandan genocide is probably among the most seminal of the more than 60 projects he has undertaken in his career.

Jaar shares Goldblatt's sense of the value and importance of context, insisting that his images must be properly contextualised and carefully controlling their circulation. His approach resonates with Goldblatt's own resistance, especially in the 1980s, to the reuse of his images for political purposes that were outside the context of their original making and meaning.

There are other similarities that confirm the logic of pairing these two artists. Neither is particularly attached to the claim that the photograph is unique, or the edition of a photograph should be limited for art's sake. Both have an interest in the representational poetics of a given situation (but where Goldblatt is more philosophical, Jaar is more of an activist). And both are highly adept at situating their images in new contexts, allowing them meaningful public lives.

These similarities are confirmed in the Goodman space itself, in which the apparently disparate media of silver gelatin prints and light boxes give a shared sense of luminosity. Although it might seem implausible, Goldblatt's silver gelatin prints shine out of the surface of the fibre-based paper they are printed on. They have their own quiet glow that, with the help of sensitive curating, deftly counterbalances the glow radiating from Jaar's coloured light boxes. Goldblatt's collection is, at any rate, much more extensive than Jaar's.

Jaar's photographs were originally produced in 1985 during a visit to the Serra Pelada mine in northeastern Brazil. It was a site subsequently "popularised" in the work of photo-journalist Sebastião Salgado. Jaar spent two weeks at the mine, not taking photographs for the first five days but waiting to become "invisible" before taking any pictures.

Dug out by the hands of 100 000 self-employed miners who sell any gold they find to government officials on site, the specificities of the yellow land and wet labour lend a particular aesthetic to Jaar's photographs, whether as close-up portraits or wide landscapes.

This is the first time that Jaar has done a two-person show. It is also the first time his Serra Pelada work has been displayed so plainly, simply as photographs. Given his attentiveness to the politics of images it is understandable why the short, almost crude video on the exhibition is a key presence in this iteration of the work.

When the 80 photographs of the Serra Pelada mine were first exhibited in New York in 1986, they were installed on billboards on the subway route between Midtown and Wall Street. Titled *Rushes*, the images butted up against each other, sometimes repeated in different colours and interspersed with the price of gold on different world markets.

These images were exhibited



Gold in the Morning: Alfredo Jaar's photographs for this series were produced in 1985 at the Serra Pelada mine in northeastern Brazil



Images from David Goldblatt's book, *On the Mines*, which was first published in 1973: *Mineworkers in their Hostel* (above), *On the bank ...* (above right), *Winder House, Farrar Shaft, Angelo Mines* (right) and *Boss Boy* detail (below)



again at the Venice Biennale, also in 1986, under the title *Gold in the Morning* (from which the title of the Goodman show is derived), but this time using a mirroring effect that had the photographs reflected on sheer surfaces placed at 90° to the images.

They were then reconfigured in a light box installation titled *Out of Balance* (1989) in which everything except the miners' bodies was eliminated from the horizontal light boxes.

When accounting for the multiple lives of these images, Jaar says, in his

approach "images are not innocent. They need help. I don't leave them alone." It is this perpetual rumination that leads to the many lives of photographs. For Jaar and Goldblatt, it is this that makes the biographies of their work so rich with enduring questions and complexities.

The exhibition runs at the Goodman Gallery, 163 Jan Smuts Avenue, until December 14. Rory Bester is head of the history of art department at the University of the Witwatersrand's school of arts