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David Goldblatt's "Particulars"

BY [GENEVIEVE FUSSELL](#)



Woman smoking. Fordsburg, Johannesburg, 1975.

CREDIT PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID GOLDBLATT, COURTESY STEIDL

In 1975, while shooting portraiture during the height of apartheid, the South African photographer David Goldblatt became fascinated by how people composed themselves in front of his camera. “What became apparent to me as I worked,” he told me, “was that, in our body language, in our clothing, in our decoration, we often declared our values.” For six months, he photographed only the details of people’s bodies—the arrangement of their limbs, the placement of their hands, and other minor gestures that he referred to as “particulars.”

Goldblatt is considered an eminent documentarian of apartheid-era South Africa, but he is emphatic that he did not set out to photograph apartheid directly. He said that this project—which is the subject of his most recent monograph, “[Particulars](#)”—was born out of his desire to be more lyrical in his photography. “I was always struck by the need to make photographs that were somehow relevant to our society, to our situation in dealing with apartheid and the opposition to it,” he told me. “But I wanted somehow to be free just to photograph the things that I found beautiful.”