



A child gives a black power salute after the funeral of Fort Calata, Matthew Goniwe, Sicelo Mhlauli and Sparrow Mkonto, the Cradock Four, who were assassinated on June 27 1985 by members of the security police. Cradock, Eastern Cape. 20 July 1985

David Goldblatt
tells Mary
Corrigall about his
desire to capture
every facet of
reality

THE PROBING EYE

David Goldblatt has a discreet presence. A habitual observer of South African society, it seems appropriate that his physical attendance is understated.

I follow his diminutive and wiry frame, which is concealed under a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, to a cluttered study at the back of his Fellside, Johannesburg home. The passing of time has taken its toll on Goldblatt; his back is faintly curved and his face is suitably leathery and lined for a 77-year-old. However, his gleaming, cerulean eyes speak of a mind still actively consuming, engaging and interpreting the world.

It is through these crystal blue eyes that this distinguished South African photographer has been surveying reality to reveal the nuances inherent to the South African consciousness since the 1950s.

Exploited miners toiling under the earth, national monuments, Afrikaans society, municipal bigwigs, the subject matter of Goldblatt's oeuvre has always been highly politicised but it is not politics per se that he represents.

"I am concerned with the polis, the people," he says.

The minutiae of South African life that defines his imagery denies the universal value of his work, he asserts.

"As a photographer I am always concerned with particulars. Bernard Shaw said that a painter can paint Rebecca at the well, but when a photographer does, it is Mary Smith. And you can never get away from Mary Smith. Universal truths are for me things I steer carefully from."

The overriding impulse that compels Goldblatt, however, is not specific to an environment; it is an objective common to any artist.

"What drives me is the impossibility of conveying in one small piece of paper the whole complexity of reality."

While Goldblatt acknowledges that it is impractical for photography to articulate the complete nature of reality – embracing past and future contexts in the way that the human mind can – he seems bent on a course that ultimately challenges photography's limitations.

"The camera is fixed in time and space and can only reveal what you choose to put in front of it. By its very nature it cannot reveal that complexity, but that is what I aspire to do," he declares.

Goldblatt's latest exhibition, entitled *Intersections/Intersected*, currently on show at the Michael Stevenson gallery in

Cape Town, certainly makes inroads in this regard. Juxtaposing his past and current oeuvres *Intersections/Intersected* creates a dialogue between these bodies of work, which has allowed Goldblatt to view his work as a cohesive whole, rather than as a sum of rigidly compartmentalised parts.

Goldblatt's most well-known photographic essays such as *The Mines* (1973), *Some Afrikaners Photographed* (1975) – the narrative that caused such a hullabaloo – and *In Boksburg* (1982) reflect not just his habitual interest in the contentious aspects of South African life, but follow a pattern whereby different echelons of society are treated and read as separate bodies of work. Similarly, distinctions have been made between his monochrome photography of the apartheid era and his colour photography of the post-apartheid era. *Intersections/Intersected* disrupts this routine.

"When it came to selecting work Michael Stevenson put recent colour work with things from before and the images started resonating and doing interesting things. It has kind of broken a mould for me and freed my mind a bit. There is a strong continuity which has been blurred since I started working in colour."

Since Goldblatt started experimenting with photography, first as an obsession when he left school in the late 1940s and then professionally from 1962 following his

father's death which freed him from the shackles of the family business, the aspect of South African society which he has found most compelling has not shifted.

"My concern has always been with values. I was concerned during apartheid with our values, our ethos and the crazy and appalling things that we did and tried to look at the conditions that gave rise to those values and how they were expressed.

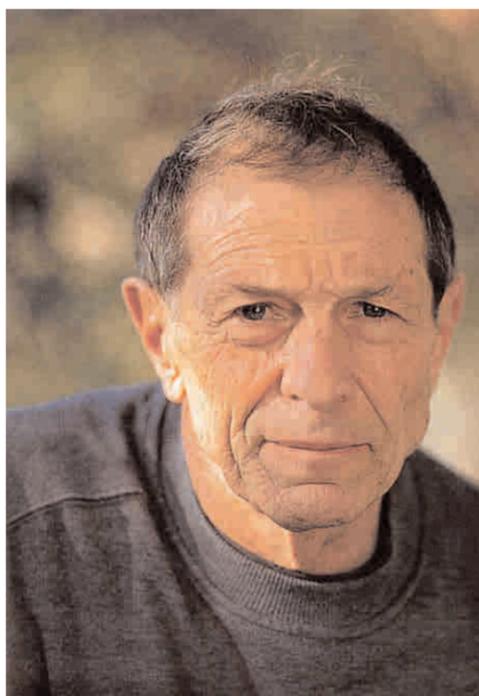
"And in post-apartheid South Africa this is still what I am doing. We obviously have a new dispensation and that has brought up new values. I am particularly interested in how we express values."

When Goldblatt first embarked on a career as a photographer, he wasn't interested in creating nuanced images that divulged societal conventions. Believing that he needed to alert the international community about the conditions of apartheid, he was compelled to snap overtly political photographs.

"I set out as a missionary [photographer] in the early 1950s; I felt that the world had to know what was going on out here."

When Goldblatt became aware that his photography would not alter the course of history, it was a painful realisation.

"I failed miserably, I was a hopeless reporter. I had no skills, it was futile. More importantly, I realised that if I was going to engage in photography that meant something to me that I would have to accept that



During his long career as a photographer Goldblatt has been interested in reflecting the values that inform South African society and how they are expressed



Stalled municipal housing scheme, Kwezinaledi, Lady Grey, Eastern Cape. 5 August 2006. David Goldblatt's photography has always been politicised. Corruption and inefficiency are some of the issues that his work explores

these photographs might go into a box and never see the light of day. So I would be doing it not because I wanted to spread the word but because I wanted to do it for myself."

This shift in his thinking marked a significant change in his evolution as a photographer; it liberated him from being a straightforward documenter generating explicit imagery.

Some *Afrikaners* further marked Goldblatt's progression into a new realm of photography. His subject matter was highly contentious and so was his approach; he demystified and humanised the Afrikaner, the oppressor.

"I knew then while doing that work that it wasn't popular to look at white people. We know they are shithouses, immoral hypocrites, why look at them?"

Coming to terms with the Afrikaner and what that community represented wasn't just a political statement. It had per-

sonal relevance for him. He grew up in Randfontein, a town dominated by Afrikaners.

"They [Afrikaners] were an important part of my growing up and experience of my life. Growing up in Randfontein there were a lot of Afrikaners, many supporters of rightwing groups. I experienced anti-Semitism and observed the treatment of black people in the town by the official structures."

Working in his father's shop, a men's outfitter, Goldblatt had to come to terms with the fact that he would be dealing with those people.

"It wasn't an easy ride, I began to enjoy the language and began to lust after its earthy idiomatic quality. I began to like many of these people, while at the same time I knew that for some of them racism was in the blood."

Given his liberal outlook, it had always been difficult for him to reconcile his affec-

tion for Afrikaners with his disapproval of their worldview. This contradiction gnawed at Goldblatt's consciousness and photography allowed him to explore the dichotomy, and, later, find catharsis.

The end of apartheid provided a different kind of release for Goldblatt. The socio-political dimension of his work no longer took precedence.

"During the years of apartheid I tended to suppress some things that I wanted to do or things that seemed at the time to be almost unthinkable. I thirsted for some lyricism and found it.

"Strangely, in some of my more *hard-gat* photographs from that era I think that there is some lyricism – but it is quite private."

Goldblatt's desire for lyricism has found an apt outlet in photographing the landscape. *Intersections/Intersected* features a number of photographs that meditate on the textural and tactile qualities of the natural environment. Although the historical, social issues tied to the land faintly hover in the recess of the mind, it is the sensuousness of the land that seems to be informing Goldblatt's gaze.

Goldblatt frequently travels around the country in his 4x4 camper van observing rural life. He talks of being "steeped and marinated" in the South African context.

"I am not interested in travelling outside South Africa. I don't feel that sense of involvement that I do here. I feel at ease in my knowledge in the place."

Goldblatt's fixation with the landscape has also seen an interest in humans' interaction with their environment; the ways in which we leave traces of our existence on the land.

From grand political structures to the plastic flowers tied to a fence to mark someone's death, Goldblatt is fascinated by monuments.

"Monuments are all of the same order; they are an expression of values. We find it necessary to mark our time on the earth, we are all like dogs pissing on poles."

Goldblatt has returned to a site near Sutherland three times, photographing a makeshift memorial to

Nicoleen Van Wyk on the edge of the road.

"I haven't got it right, I will be going back again," he says. "I know that there is something there that I need to bring (into focus)."

Living, breathing subjects present a different set of challenges. Goldblatt says there is no furtive skill in getting a subject to "reveal" themselves to the camera.

"I tend to be rather tough. I don't make it easy with the subject. I am not concerned with making my subjects comfortable. I want some tension but not an awkwardness where they end up revealing themselves in ways that are perhaps self-denigrating. Although I did exploit that quite deliberately when I photographed some politicians."

Reiterating his supreme purpose, Goldblatt says the goal with any subject is to articulate the plurality of existence.

"The ultimate portrait is one in which the whole past of somebody and what is imminent and immanent in their future is laid bare."

Goldblatt has yet to achieve this.

"It's a bloody hard thing to do, to make a photograph that is going to be somehow evocative of that person's past and future."

No doubt he has set himself such an unattainable ambition so that he will forever remain on a path of discovery.

□ *Intersections/Intersected* is showing at Michael Stevenson gallery in Cape Town until March. Goldblatt will also show a collection of photography of Johannesburg at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg from April 26



Accident on the N1 between Colesberg and Hanover, Northern Cape 25 March 2007. Whether grand political edifices or plastic flowers tied to the edge of the road, Goldblatt is interested in the ways people mark or commemorate their existence

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