

Mikhael Subotzky's best shot

'She was in tears as she sang - but I don't think the family were unhappy'

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- Interview by [Leo Benedictus](#)
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Multiple narratives ... detail of Mikhael Subotzky's best shot. Photograph: Magnum

This house in Beaufort West, South Africa, is home to the whole Mallies family. It's in an isolated, bleak desert town on the main highway between Johannesburg and Cape Town. The family survives on what 19-year-old Michelle - the girl sitting by the door - earns as a sex worker, and the father's disability grant - he is the man on the right.

I spent a couple of weeks hanging out with the family. This photograph was taken one day when they were drinking and joking. They don't drink often, but when the grant comes they drink quite a bit - maybe too much. Michelle's cousin Bonnita, who was living there at the time, stood up and started singing a church hymn in Afrikaans. She's the one with her arm outstretched.

I used a medium-format Mamiya camera with a 50mm lens to take this, using only natural light. I like the fact that the photograph contains multiple narratives - that's very rare. We're in the family's living room-cum-kitchen; through the doorway is the bedroom where they all sleep. The mother is the one standing with a glass in her hand, looking very contained in her thoughts. On the other side of the door frame is a calendar, a picture of Michelle's little brother, and Michelle's old school photograph and certificates. The boy on the bed is Michelle's son, and the girl is Bonnita's daughter.

You can also see a man lying there behind Bonnita and Michelle. He was another member of the extended family - a cousin of Michelle's mother, I think. His name was Joseph and he had tuberculosis. He died shortly afterwards.

Bonnita was in tears as she was singing. But I don't think the family were unhappy. They had huge battles, and theirs is a sad, messed-up situation. But, within that, people make meaning and happiness for themselves.

Curriculum Vitae

Born: Cape Town, 1981

Studied: University of Cape Town

Inspirations: Gideon Mendel, Jeff Wall, Martin Parr, Josef Koudelka and David Goldblatt.

High point: "Staging an exhibition in Nelson Mandela's old cell in Pollsmoor prison."

Low point: "A lot of what I see is difficult and doesn't make sense - it's a low point witnessing difficult things."

Pet hate: "Debates about digital versus film."

Dream subject: "People I meet, especially in South Africa. It is the one country I feel I know well enough to comment on."