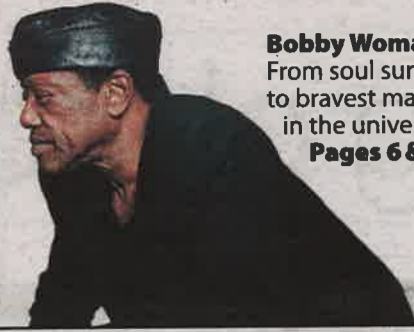


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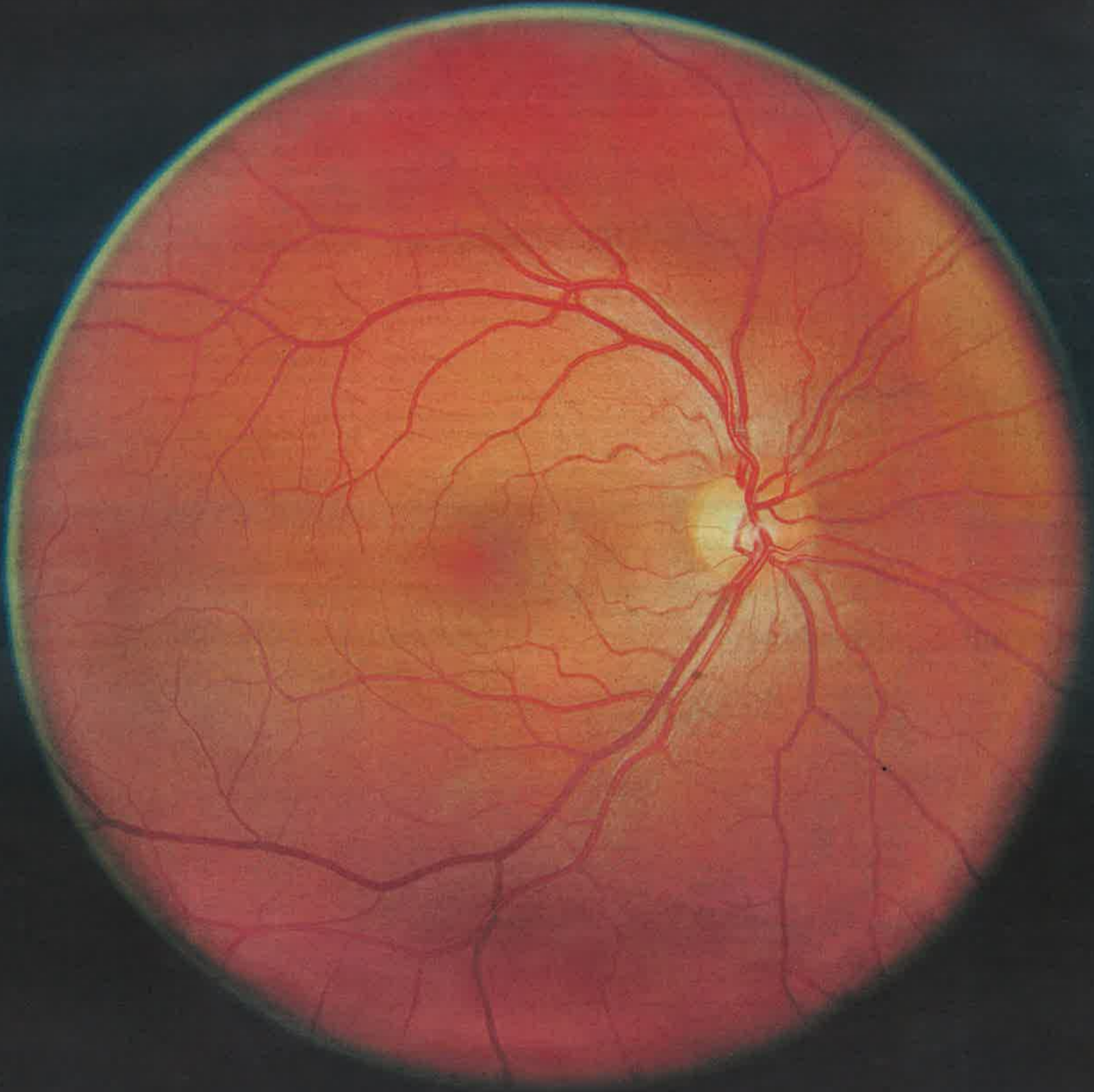


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Visual art

Observers of the settlers' town

Mikhael Subotzky's new film brings the personal lives of Grahamstown's resident tour guides into the settler discourse

Anthea Buys

Griffiths Sokuyeka's laughter is misplaced. He uses it to punctuate trifling facts, such as the age of the building, or the common names of the sections in which we linger: "foyer", "atrium", "fountain", "theatre". He has been giving the same tour of the 1820 Settlers Monument in Grahamstown for more than a decade. The sequence and wording are his own invention, although there has been occasional guidance from his employers, the senior custodians of the Grahamstown Foundation and its assets.

Sokuyeka is a caretaker in the building and takes good care of his responsibilities, which extend to hoisting and lowering the flags of South Africa and the Grahams-town Foundation each day, turning the fountain on and off and generally preventing disorder within his ambit.

He does these things with a proficiency that signals a greater aptitude. There are visitors to the site for whom he hopes to make the experience exceptional: schoolchildren, especially those who come for day trips from the townships. And so he invests these tasks, which a different person might have thought mundane, with a special gravity. It is still summer, but his collared shirt and tie are immaculate over what must be a thick vest. He has the decorum of a waning generation.

Sokuyeka features as one of two protagonists in a new film by Mikhael Subotzky. The film, titled *Moses and Griffiths* after its principal subjects, reconstructs Grahamstown's history through the narratives presented by Sokuyeka and Moses Lamani, who works as a guide at the Observatory Museum on the other side of the town.

By the time I arrive in Grahams-



Lens on Grahamstown: A still (above) from the film *Moses and Griffiths* which forms part of the exhibition *Retinal Shift* by Mikhael Subotzky (right). Photo: Guy Tillim

town to observe Subotzky's work-in-progress and meet Lamani and Sokuyeka, he has interviewed them almost daily during several long sojourns in this small Eastern Cape town.

Subotzky received the Standard Bank Young Artist award for visual art in 2012. The award grants the winner a travelling solo exhibition, which customarily starts at the Monument Gallery in Grahamstown and then shows at as many public institutions around the country as are able to include it in their annual programme.

Subotzky has been preparing *Moses and Griffiths*, a key element of his award show *Retinal Shift*, in the town itself. There are five other pieces, some of which reconfigure material he has made or collected in the past 10 years. Others, such as *Moses and Griffiths*, are newly filmed.

Moses and Griffiths proceeds from two architectural sites symbolic of inspection: the Observatory Museum, which contains a Victorian camera obscura built for the purpose



of locating the town doctor, and the 1820 Settlers Monument, a brutalist hulk erected in the 1960s to "watch over" the English language in South Africa. The tours given by Lamani and Sokuyeka originate in some physical feature of the buildings where they work, whether the mechanism of the camera obscura or the assortment and layout of rooms and theatres named to honour cultural saints, before they vault into the history of the town.

At Subotzky's prompting, the men also talk about their own lives in the film, revealing their personal histories embedded in the streets and buildings of the town.

These four stories, each man's official tour and the personal tour that is its counterpoint, their clashes and convergences, will be orchestrated in the installation.

Sokuyeka's tour starts with the history of the British citizens who sailed to and finally settled in South Africa in 1820. Their saga is punctuated by numerous "challenges": destitution in their homeland, a long time at sea and then a protracted war with the Boers. Although Britain's colonisation of South Africa was fraught with abuse, he portrays the settlers as well intentioned and vulnerable.

The inception of the Nationalist government in South Africa in 1948 is described as a threat to the survival of the English language in the country. The advent of apartheid does not figure in his narrative, as though within the concrete and yellowwood shell of the monument a world exists in which the most sinister thing former prime minister DF Malan could have done was to ban the reading of Thomas Pringle.

Sokuyeka has been faithful to the settler history he tells, often deliberately avoiding other narrative strands in South Africa's past. After a blaze destroyed the monument in 1994, much of the building's interior had to be reconstructed and many South African artists offered support by donating artworks to the Grahamstown Foundation.

Despite Sokuyeka's efforts to solicit information about these more recent works, his knowledge of the foundation's art collection ends at

the Cecil Skotnes woodcut panels commissioned in 1985. These hang in the central atrium of the monument and Sokuyeka regards them as a highlight of his tour. He decodes them slowly, one at a time, adding ornamental pauses and repetitions. Now and again he looks the camera straight in the eye.

The effect, when the footage is played back, is that Sokuyeka appears to look directly at the viewer. In so doing, he breaks with the cinematic convention that so well facilitates an audience's suspension of disbelief: in the ordinary course of things, the actors never look directly at the camera. We pretend they are unaware of being watched and nothing is demanded in return besides, perhaps, the cost of a movie ticket.

With Sokuyeka looking occasionally into the lens, it is possible for us to fantasise that the inspection proceeds in both directions, that we are not simply voyeurs. In fact, as we might with a photograph, we may imagine that he does look at us. His image will hold this power for as long as Subotzky's material survives, even after the embodied Sokuyeka is no more.

Yet, when Sokuyeka looks directly into the lens of Subotzky's camera, he is not looking at another person, even though he appears to be. When we look at him on screen and assume the position of his addressee, we are really only inserting ourselves in place of a machine with a single prosthetic eye. During the filming process, the direction of Sokuyeka's gaze is a measure of his personal connection to what he says.

Some weeks into their work together, Subotzky encourages him to alternate his routine tour of the monument with an improvised one about himself. This personal tour, a history of Grahamstown peppered with his own experiences, Sokuyeka calls his "profile". In these sessions, it is as if he wants to look over or through the camera to reach Subotzky's eyes. In response, Subotzky moves the camera to his shoulder while still filming and Sokuyeka anchors his eyes in Subotzky's. In these moments, it is just as Roland Barthes writes: "The photographer's 'second sight' does not consist in 'seeing' but in being there."

As with his regular tour, Sokuyeka becomes increasingly at ease at performing his personal tour, sloughing off his stories. He tells us that during the evenings at his home he looks through a box of photographs in search of "things" — by which he means memories — for Subotzky and the film he is making.

The camera's promise has given a particular curvature to his life; Sokuyeka, too, wants to be remembered. Among all the plaques and stones he wants one of his own that recognises his having "done something for the foundation".

He says: "They must put my name on the wall over there and they must always say: 'Griffiths — we remember everything he did for this place.'"

These are edited extracts from the catalogue titled *Retinal Shift*, published by Steidl, and the content is used courtesy of the Goodman Gallery and Standard Bank. The exhibition *Retinal Shift* will be shown at the Monument Gallery and at the Gallery in the Round at the National Arts Festival that runs in Grahamstown from June 28 to July 8. Subotzky's film is produced by Good Cop

Artistic vision

There is a scene near the end of Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 thriller *Rear Window* in which the protagonist, a wheelchair-bound photographer with a penchant for spying on his neighbours, watches as his girlfriend is caught snooping in the apartment of a man suspected of murder. Jeffries, the photographer, calls the police and they arrive just in time to save her, but as she is being escorted out of the apartment, the murderer, Thorwald, realises that he is being watched. He looks back at Jeffries with intent, and the lights in his apartment go out. Within seconds he is in Jeffries's building, on his way up the stairs to the photographer's apartment. All Jeffries can find to defend himself against the imminent attack is a box of flashbulbs. Once Thorwald gains entry, Jeffries closes his eyes and fires off the flashes one after another,



Self portrait: Subotzky's eyes made with the help of an optometrist

blinding Thorwald for a few seconds. To protect himself from the penalty for his uninvited looking, Jeffries blinds his opponent, reinstating himself momentarily as the only one capable of using his eyes against the other.

At the entrance to Mikhael Subotzky's exhibition *Retinal Shift* are two giant, blind eyeballs. They are images of Subotzky's retinas, and were made under circumstances that recall the climactic scene in *Rear Window* (bar the mortal threat to the protagonist). Very near to the camera obscura in Grahamstown there is a small optometry practice where, among other things, the optometrist



must occasionally photograph people's retinas. This is done to check for irregularities that do not reveal themselves conclusively in compromised sight. Subotzky, who as far as he can tell has perfect vision, asked for a portrait of his eyes. The image can only be made using a bright light, which is flashed directly into the pupils. It is momentarily blinding.

In an especially bare way, this gives a lesson: the difference between a reciprocal, consenting gaze and the kind of looking that analyses and takes stock — and surveillance is precisely this sort of looking — is someone's blindness.

— Anthea Buys