

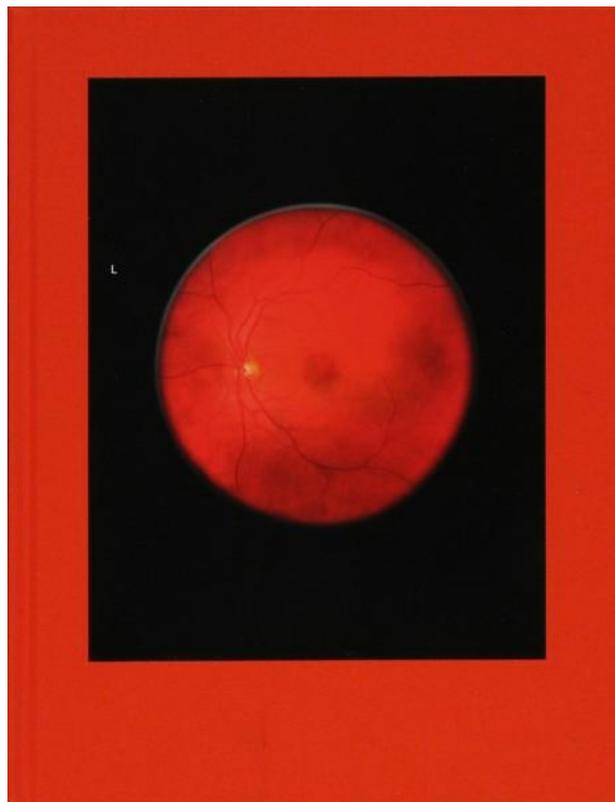
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Book Reviews: Retinal Shift



Retinal Shift. Photographs by Mikhael Subotzky.
Published by Steidl, 2012.



Retinal Shift

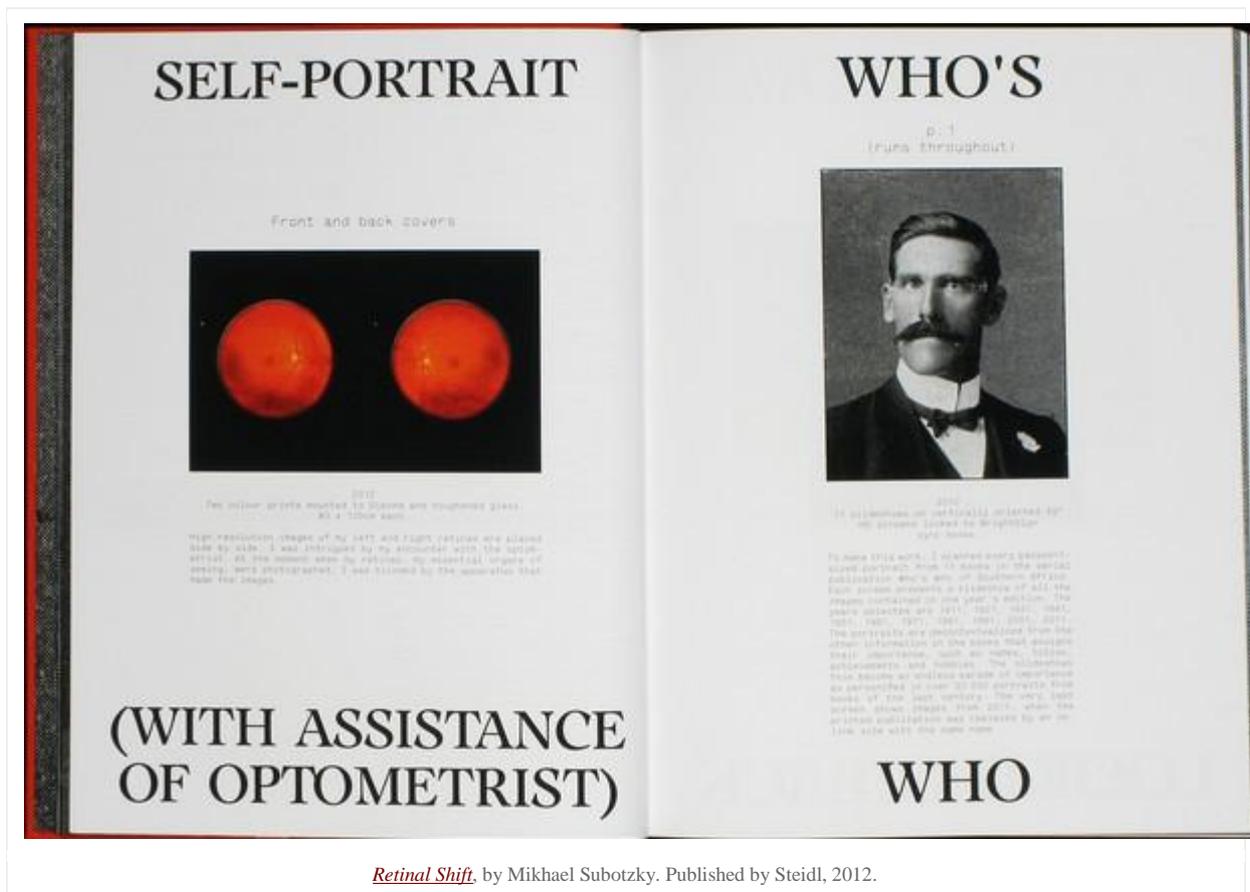
Reviewed by Blake Andrews

Retinal Shift

Photographs by Mikhael Subotzky
Steidl, 2012. Hardbound. 490 pp., 250 color illustrations, 7-1/2x10-1/4".

The first thing one notices about Mikhael Subotzky's *Retinal Shift* is its size. At 490 pages, two inches thick, and weighing just over 5 pounds, *Retinal Shift* is among more mammoth photobooks I've encountered. To get a sense of the dimensions think of Magnum Degrees or Magnum Landscapes. Or just think of the word Magnum, which identifies Subotzky as well as his tome. Publisher Steidl has not held much back here.

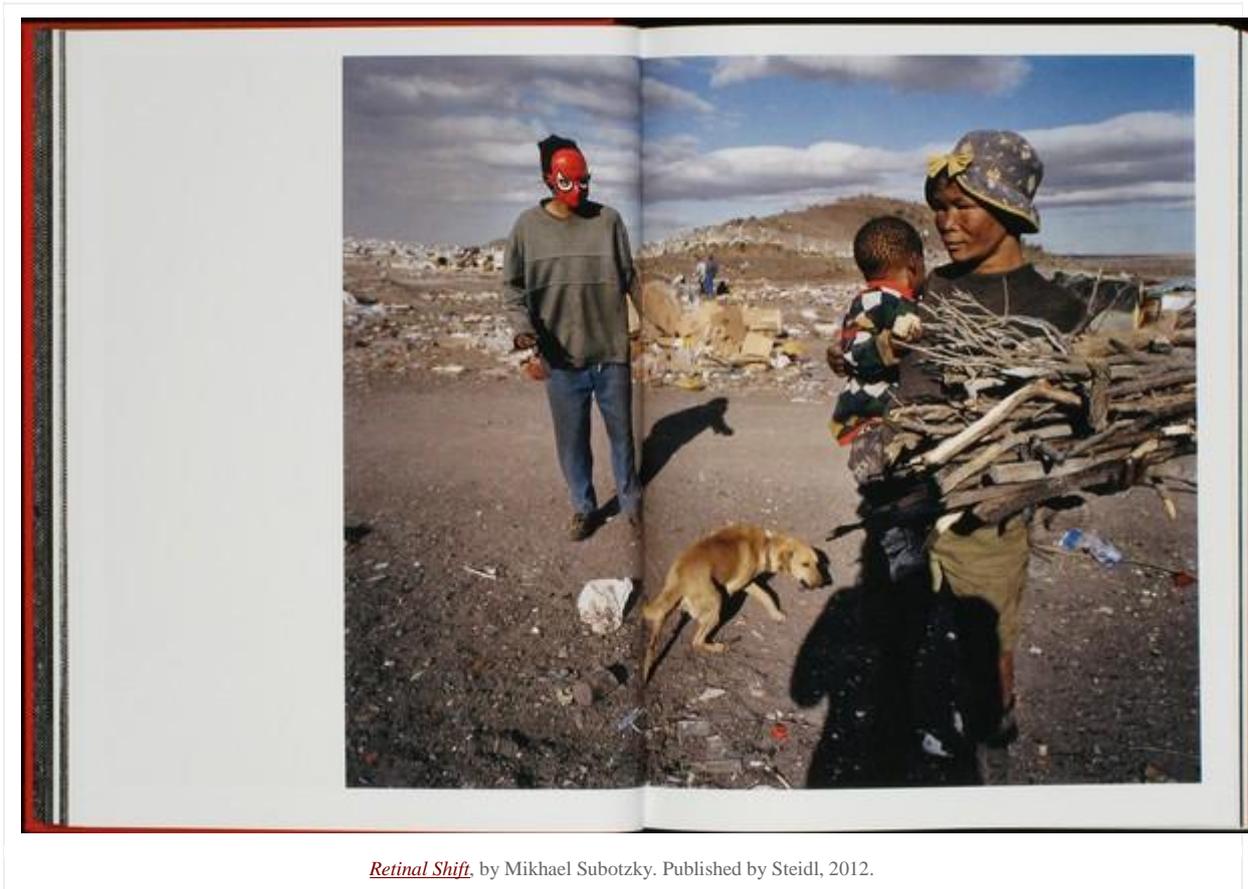
Retinal Shift's proportions are explained by the fact that it's actually composed of several smaller (relative term) photo essays, some of them interwoven and interspersed across the entire book, some encapsulated in their own sequences, and some doing a bit of both. To help the reader sort things out the book begins with a handy multipage key. As a further interpretive aid the book includes essays by Anthea Buys and Shawn O'Toole. These can be read as book reviews of the book that contains them, one of the *Retinal Shift's* several self-referential methods. We also see portraits of Subotzky photographing, photos of other photos, photos of photos of photos, and of course the cover and title, which reference the very act of looking.



Retinal Shift, by Mikhael Subotzky. Published by Steidl, 2012.

If it sounds a bit like a variety show that's because it's meant to be. *Retinal*

Shift is the physical manifestation of Subotzky's Standard Bank Young Artist Exhibition, a retrospective which travels to major museums in Subotzky's native South Africa this year and next. The show features a wide range of source material, from his own photos to surveillance footage to found headshots and more. These cover a wide range of years going back to 1911 and are displayed on museum walls in a variety of formats including video, slideshows, and traditional still prints.



Retinal Shift, by Mikhael Subotzky. Published by Steidl, 2012.

I'm not sure any book can truly translate such a broad museum experience, and in fact that was not Subotzky's intent. "My aim," he explains, "was to produce two separate but related conduits for the work. So the book isn't an illustration of the exhibition, but rather a discrete form which carries the work in a different way."

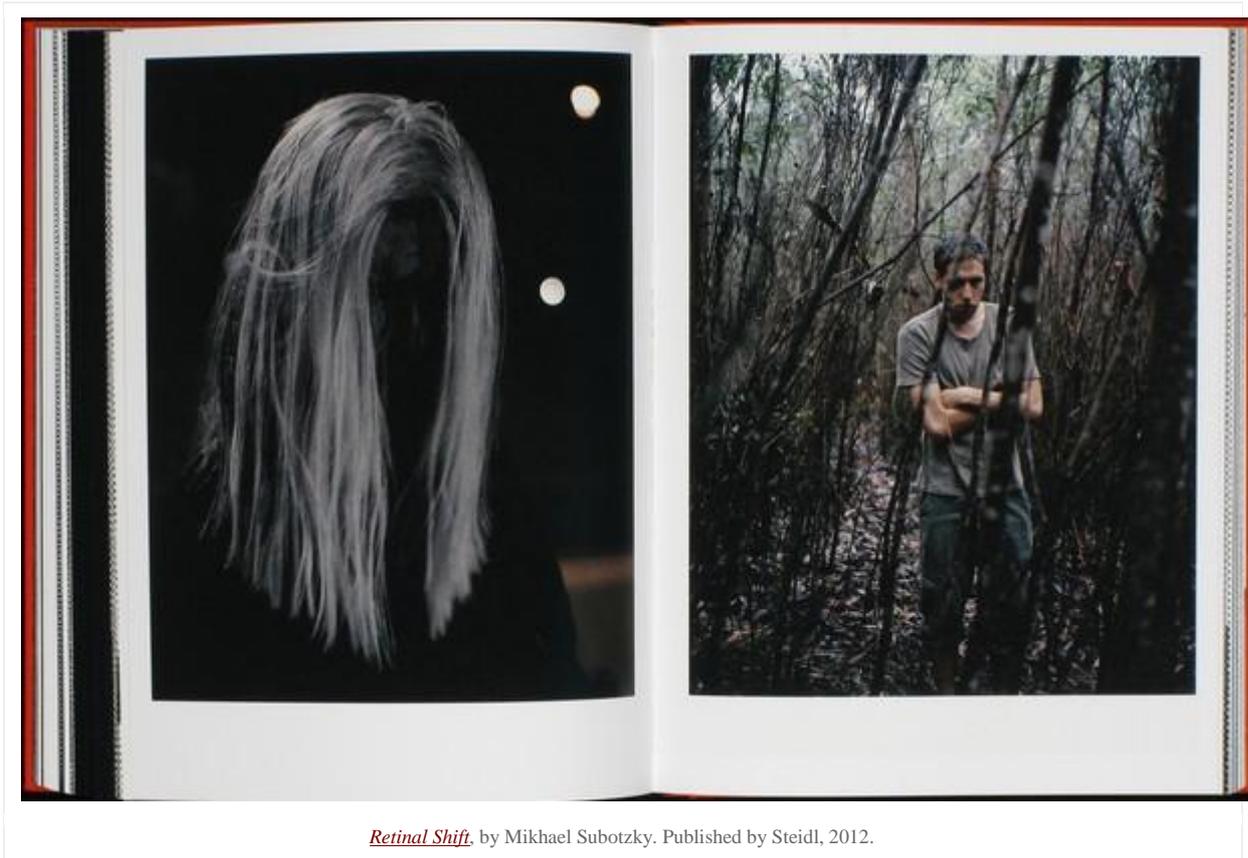
Nevertheless comparisons between book and exhibition are inevitable. Leafing through the pages has some of the character of wandering through an art museum. No strict sequence is necessary. One can glance in this room, then this one. There are various interpretive guides along the way. Like a museum, the experience is probably different for each individual depending on how long they spend in any place and in what order.



It's only gradually after visiting many rooms that one gets a sense of what Subotzky is after: The act of looking. Not necessarily seeing. That's still up to the photographer. But looking, which can be done by any blunt device. Whether it's CCTV or headshot or optometrist or tour guide footage or whether it's Subotzky himself behind the camera is relatively unimportant. And in fact a large portion of the work is not by Subotzky. It's appropriated from outside sources. As if to drive home the point, even the book's covers are left to a machine. The front and back depict images of Subotzky's left and right retinas shot by his optometrist. As the subject of the photo, Subotzky was blind at the precise moment of exposure.

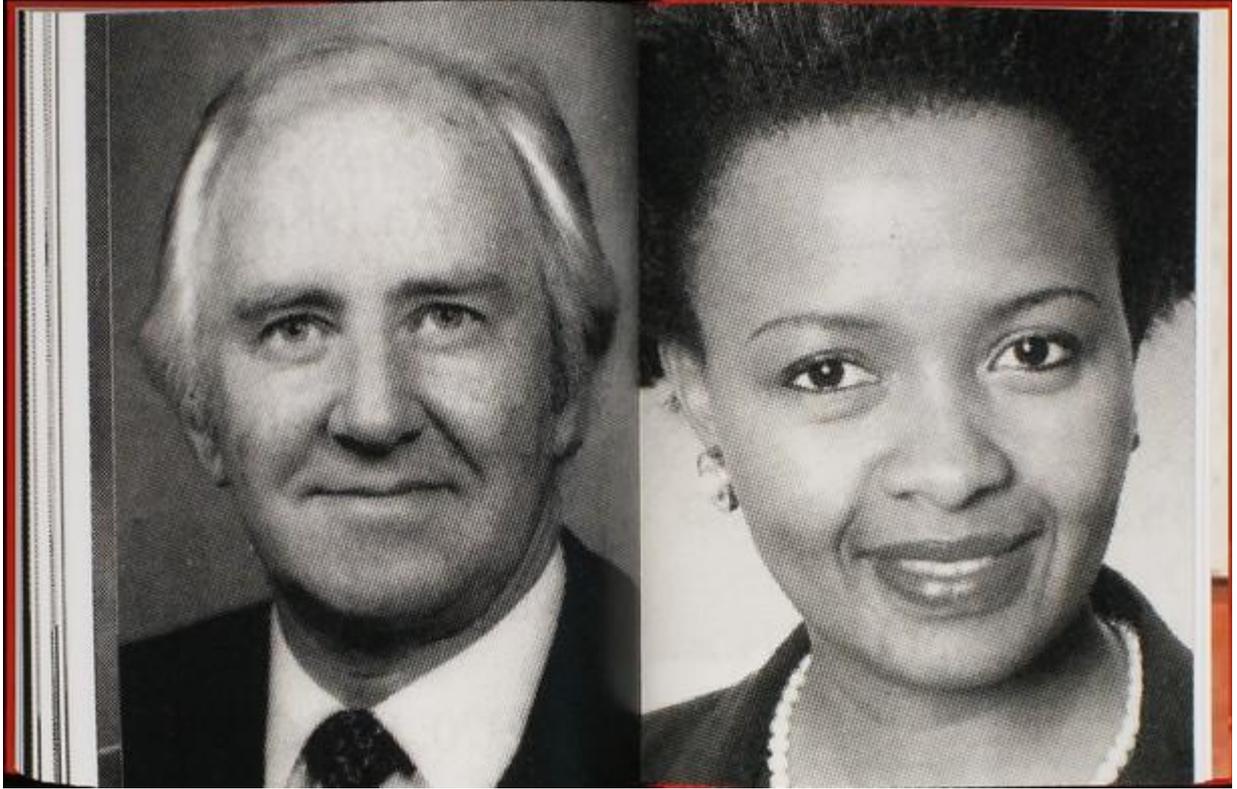


But it doesn't matter so much if he could see or if he "authored" these images, however that term might be interpreted. The era of the lone photographer going out into the world with a camera to hunt for images has been left behind. In its place is the photographer as curator, sorting through and managing a huge variety of material from every conceivable source, each one conveying a unique way of looking. Society has never before had so many methods of photographic recording and *Retinal Shift* attempts to include as many as possible.



Retinal Shift, by Mikhael Subotzky. Published by Steidl, 2012.

For me the book's centerpiece is the section titled *Who's Who*. This is a series of full-page headshots running throughout the book, depicting grey-scale portraits in ten-year increments from *Who's Who of Southern Africa*. The first group is from 1911, and from that point the portraits gradually diversify and loosen in subject and tone. Not only are they a marvelous way to examine shifting ideals of importance, but they have graphic quality which is fascinating. As in any offset book, all of the images are halftones. But the original images themselves are halftones, which Subotzky has expanded so that the grain dominates. When viewed from very close the images blur into total abstraction, a reminder that every photograph is merely a clumsy representation. In the final grouping from 2011 the half tones have morphed into the pixelated color jpgs that comprise much of contemporary photography. A history lesson in multiple ways.



Retinal Shift, by Mikhael Subotzky. Published by Steidl, 2012.

As with most Steidl titles, Subotzky spent time in Gottingen with Gerhard Steidl working on the book's production, and in conjunction with designers in America. Although the resulting book is in some ways imposing and difficult, it also feels quite personal. When we open the covers and peer between the two retinas, the essential subject becomes clear. It's the grey matter contained behind them.—BLAKE ANDREWS