

## Art & Design

ART REVIEW

# Splitting a Gallery in Half to Focus on Social Strife

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The Museum of Modern Art's annual "New Photography" exhibitions have tended to resemble a reality-show competition. Usually one artist stands out from a group of three or four (last year it was Tanyth Berkeley, whose portraits of unconventionally beautiful albino and transgendered women easily trumped earnest but dull projects by Scott McFarland and Berni Searle).

This time around there are only two photographers, and they come from opposite ends of the discipline, making it difficult to judge them by the same scale. Josephine Meckseper, a German-born, CalArts-trained artist in her 40s, makes sleek-looking installations that mix photography and film — often scenes of political protest — with consumer objects. The South African Mikhael Subotzky, who at 26 is the youngest photographer to have been invited to join the Magnum Group, explores his country's prison system in vivid color and unflinching detail.

With this pairing Roxana Marcoci, the photography curator, seems to have hedged her bets by juxtaposing documentary and conceptual responses to social discord. Each artist has been allotted exactly half the gallery, although a careful viewer will see that strategies and subjects sometimes creep from one side to the other.

Ms. Meckseper exhibits a series of related works that function, more or less, as a single installation. Appearing throughout are photographs of young women wearing 1950s-style lingerie: flesh-toned girdles and white knee-high stockings. Along one wall life-size versions of these images have been overlaid on wallpaper printed with pages from the 1970s German mail-order catalog Quelle International.

The dated clothing styles in the catalog — tight-fitting men’s polos, high-waisted and flared denim, polyester maxidresses with winged collars — are a hoot. So is the lingerie in Ms. Meckseper’s photos (the garments, we are told, come from the Lower East Side of Manhattan), although there is something slightly disturbing about the image of a sulky young woman, seemingly plucked from an American Apparel ad, modeling the type of undergarment likely to have been worn by her bubbe.

Some of the same pictures appear in Ms. Meckseper’s shelf and vitrine displays, which have a five-and-dime storefront aesthetic: mannequin legs and heads, mirror fragments, cleaning products and assorted clutter. Tucked in among the toilet brushes and shower caps are photographs taken at antiwar demonstrations in New York and Washington. (Some are actually flip sides of other photographs, visible only as reflections in the installations’ mirrored backing.)

It all comes across as a particularly German critique of bourgeois culture, a nostalgic throwback to the early-’60s “capitalist realism” of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke. Echoes of *Neue Sachlichkeit* paintings by Christian Schad are also visible in the portraits of young women. But Ms. Meckseper’s work looks best in a politically strident context, as it did in the 2006 Whitney Biennial; here the references to protest are so subtle as to be practically imperceptible.

In style and subject Mr. Subotzky is indebted to the South African photographer David Goldblatt, who documented the effects of apartheid on the daily lives of black mine laborers and white middle-class workers. As an artist born just a decade before the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, however, Mr. Subotzky brings a different perspective to the table.

His series “Beaufort West” (2006-8) stems from his undergraduate thesis project at the University of Cape Town, a series of panoramic photographs taken at Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison (one of the sites of Mr. Mandela’s incarceration). Beaufort West Prison, located in a small town in the Karoo Desert, is comparatively unspectacular. It does, however, occupy a high-visibility position in the town’s geographic center; an aerial shot shows the local highway encircling the prison in a giant roundabout.

Mr. Subotzky documents the world just outside the prison as well as the conditions within its ring of barbed wire. The twist, naturally, is that the quality of life looks better on the inside. Cells are clean and well-lit, if minimally appointed; prisoners attend church services and decorate their walls with pin-ups of Anna Nicole Smith. One orange-jumpsuited man naps on a bench beneath a painted mural of the blue-skied desert landscape.

There are indignities, to be sure. In “Jacks Shines Swanepoel’s Shoes,” a black prisoner buffs the boot of a white guard. But the appalling residue of apartheid is most visible in the photographs taken along Beaufort’s improverished fringes. A young prostitute, earlier pictured at home with her family, arches her back over the side of a client’s truck. The subject of “Leon, Beaufort West Hospital” roams the streets with a knife in one hand and an I.V. drip attached to the other. And in a scene that could have been captured by Weegee, a police flashlight illuminates the bloodied and swollen face of a beating victim.

Some of the most affecting images were taken in broad daylight. Three photographs of the Vaalkoppies garbage dump, a sprawling wasteland right out of Cormac McCarthy, show people combing the piles for food scraps. One scavenger wears a Spider-Man mask — presumably for hygienic reasons, but the costume underscores the scene’s sense of unreality.

Less subtle, in a way, are the photographs taken in Beaufort’s more affluent suburbs. A white man who is paid to hunt the jackals that roam local estates is shown with a string of dead animals hanging in his truck. Another white man, the proprietor of an antiques shop, minds the store from behind a marble desk. Oddly, he is flanked by two female mannequins dressed in revealing outfits. In both photographs, the black African body has been displaced, but the imbalance of power remains.

If Ms. Meckseper finds glossy, consumerist fantasy infiltrating our political conscience, Mr. Subotzky reminds us that some communities don’t yet have the luxury of fretting about the commodification of dissent.

*“New Photography 2008: Josephine Meckseper and Mikhael Subotzky” continues through Jan. 5 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, [moma.org](http://moma.org).*