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Documenting and Inhabiting the Contradictions, Mikhael Subotzky - published in the Sunday Independent



Photo by **Julia Merrett**

When you are the youngest, current photographer at Magnum, the world's most exclusive photographic co-operative, alongside the likes of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Josef Koudelka it can't be easy keeping your feet on the ground and your eye behind the lens. But, over lunch one day, I discovered that South African-born photographer, [Mikhael Subotzky](#), seems determined to do both. His final-year project which took him into the *vier hoeke* of Pollsmoor Prison while studying at the University of Cape Town, propelled him into the international arena and, since graduating in 2004, has exhibited extensively in South Africa as well as abroad, including London, Paris, Basel and Rome. Prints from his debut exhibition entitled 'Die Vier Hoeke' are housed permanently in the South African National Gallery, the Johannesburg Art Gallery and The Museum of Modern Art in New York. 26-year old Subotzky's most recent body of work on the Karoo town of Beaufort-West opened at the Goodman Gallery earlier this year and has been exhibited in Amsterdam and Verona. Needless to say, this young bright thing has been living out of a suitcase for the last three years.

After completing a gruelling 6-month tour though Europe, which included a work stint at Fabrica for a couple of months, Subotzky is back on South African soil. “I want to spend most of 2008 out here working on new work.” And then with a sheepish smile, adds: “I’m probably moving to Joburg”. I’m momentarily surprised at the news but when he begins telling me about his future projects, his reasons for the move become apparent. “I’m going to be doing more work around crime and different forms of security – public, private and illegal security.” Although Subotzky sees this subject matter as a continuation of his earlier work or, as he puts it, another ‘chapter’, he is looking forward to producing work that is completely different to what he shot in Pollsmoor and Beaufort-West. “I’m going to be looking at affluence in South Africa and the fast-growing black middle class”, says Subotzky who is particularly fascinated with how cities are changing in response to crime. “I would like to present a very different view of the work I’ve done previously which looked at the margins and people living in the worst places of society.”



Photo by **Mikhael Subotzky**

In the long-term, this driven and ambitious young photographer envisions an extensive exhibition and an equally hefty book which reflects the thematic resonance of his photos. “For me all these things fit together”, he says reflecting on his work, “its another way of looking at crime and how crime causes divisions.” When I comment on the fact that his new work is interesting in terms of the fact that, this time, it is the elite that are being photographed rather than impoverished communities on the periphery of society, he replies: “Yes, traditionally, the photo documentary gaze has

been very much focused on poor, marginalised people.” And he is acutely aware of the challenges that this poses. “People in affluent parts of society tend to value their privacy more, and what I found is in places like prison where people have very little privacy they’re very keen to tell their story and enjoy the attention.” For Subotzky the issue of private/public speaks to the broader socio-economic disparities that exist, especially in a country like South Africa. “For me this says a lot about the different worlds that exists side by side in our society; and it is important for me to be conscious and sensitive to these issues in all contexts”, he adds.



Photo by **Julia Merrett**

Over coffee, our conversation shifts slightly from the political to the personal and I ask him about his artist’s statement which refers to his attempt at making sense of the strangeness of the world around him. “In that statement, the sense making is very personal. I think the only possible route to meaningful social change comes through consciousness and I think the first place to start is with one’s own personal consciousness”. Despite the intensely political nature of his work, Subotzky does not have any illusions about the role of the photojournalist. “I’m quite cynical about the ability for photography to bring about meaningful social change. I think it’s vastly exaggerated and overrated”, he says smiling wryly. If anything, he finds photojournalism problematic. “It’s a fallacy that it is possible to be a fly-on-the-wall

observer. I'm very conscious about not doing that. Yes, I am trying to create an impression of the world as I see it but I'm never pretending that I'm not there or that I'm not influencing a situation."

We chat briefly about some of the photos in the Beaufort-West series which were particularly controversial. "My process has always been very much about interacting with people, building relationships. My photographs will always be about my experiences of being there, and what I see." For some reason, this makes me think about what photographer he would he choose to photograph him. "Jim Goldberg or Seydou Keita or William Eggleston", he says after a thoughtful pause. When I ask him where he sees himself 20 years from now, he jokingly refers to the fact that even now, he is still known as the 'prison photographer' and in the future wants to work in completely different ways. "Lately I've been taking pictures which have been much more about my own life - family, friends and partners. Its been exciting making my immediate surroundings part of my work." As we finish up he shrugs off my question about whether he is influenced by, or concerned about, other people's expectations of him. "As long as I position myself as much as possible within the work itself rather than thinking too much about others, the work itself will lead to other directions."

POSTED BY [RAFFAELLA DELLE DONNE](#) AT [1:41 PM](#)

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