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## Looking back in anger to be seen

BY CHRIS THURMAN, MAY 30 2013, 05:32



PORTRAITS: Who's Who, part of Mikhael Subotzky's Retinal Shift exhibition at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg.

IT IS almost a year since I first saw Mikhael Subotzky's Retinal Shift at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown — or, at least, saw part of it. The exhibition was divided between venues on different floors of the 1820 Settlers Monument. Upstairs were four components of Retinal Shift, each exploring Subotzky's long-standing fascination with the reciprocal activities of looking and being looked at, of seeing and being seen.

I Was Looking Back is a collection of photographs from the artist's portfolio of the past decade, with subjects ranging from prison life to private security. These twin concerns, with their shared relation to surveillance and law enforcement in a crime-ridden country, resonate with the police footage displayed in the 2011 work, CCTV. Here, Subotzky creates a compact

visual symphony, conducting 12 small feeds on one screen like so many instruments in a chamber orchestra and bringing them to a crescendo of ostensible justice: once apprehended, the perpetrators are shown the camera that caught them out.

In *Don't Even Think of It*, Subotzky stitches together still photographs into a stop-motion film documenting the grimy, impoverished street life of a Cape Town far removed from the idyllic clichés usually applied to that city. This voyeurism captures a very different set of "public faces" from the installation *Who's Who*, in which the artist has digitised a century's worth of portrait photographs appearing in *Who's Who of Southern Africa*. If the images — pulled from one volume a decade between 1911 and 2011 — are to be believed, white women became "noteworthy" only in the 1930s and black people in the 1990s.

### Mikhael Subotzky

- Born in 1981, in Cape Town
- Received his Fine Arts degree at UCT's Michaelis School of Fine Art in 2003, attaining 100% for his major in the medium of photography — the highest mark ever awarded to a student
- At 28, he was the youngest photographer to be invited to prestigious photography group Magnum Photo Agencies
- Moved to Johannesburg in 2008 and set up a studio in the Arts on Main culture complex in Johannesburg's eastern CBD
- Awards include the Special Jurors Award at the Seventh Recontres Africaines de la Photographie in Bamako; the F25 Award for Concerned Photography; the Young Photographer Award at Perpignan; the KLM Paul Huf Award and the W. Eugene Smith Memorial Grant
- He is currently the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year in photography — the highest award nationally in the Arts

The fifth part of *Retinal Shift* was tucked away among the rabbit warren of rooms in the basement of the 1820 Settler Monument. Each time I made my way there, it was closed — mostly because I was late. In a comical re-enactment of the fractured, interrupted sightlines that are central to the exhibition, I observed Subotzky himself trying to repair and rearrange the venue: the artist's legs and feet were visible as he wrestled with a recalcitrant screen, but I could not watch his acclaimed four-channel projection, *Moses and Griffiths*.

So you can imagine how pleased I was, after a long delay, to visit the Standard Bank Gallery in Joburg, where *Retinal Shift* is being exhibited again (until June 15). And you can imagine the disorienting effect of sitting down to watch *Moses and Griffiths*, surrounded by a quartet of screens, to find myself transported back into the cavernous architecture of the monument, with its huge framework of beams and pillars and Cubist-Surrealist-Africanist Cecil Skotnes panels.

This is the domain of Griffiths Sokuyeka, cleaner turned tour guide at the monument, whose eccentric historical anecdotes and personal recollections form one half of *Moses and Griffiths*.

Sokuyeka takes us from the 1820 Settlers' landing at Algoa Bay to the fire that almost razed the monument in 1994. The latter event is vivid in Sokuyeka's memory, as he was accused of negligence in allowing the blaze to spread — an accusation about which he is still bitter. Indeed, his angry recollection of apartheid-era mistreatment by the descendants of the British settlers belies his gregarious enthusiasm as an amateur historian.

Merging seamlessly with Sokuyeka's narrative is that of Moses Lamani, who is a tour guide of a different kind; he operates the camera obscura at the Albany Observatory Museum. This curious Victorian device, the only one of its kind in the southern hemisphere, allows the viewer to survey the town while hidden in the eyrie of the observatory tower.

Given Subotzky's interest in different forms of viewing technology, it is not surprising he was drawn to the *camera obscura*. But more fascinating than the virtual tour of Grahamstown's architecture and urban geography is Lamani's account of his own life story — evidence of the present-day implications, for residents of the Eastern Cape, of the region's "frontier" past.

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