

Jan 28, 2015



Cleaning the Core, Ponte City, Johannesburg (2008), Mikhael Subotzky & Patrick Waterhouse. Courtesy Goodman Gallery © Magnum Photos

Portrait of an apartment block: 'Ponte City' at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery

[ANNABEL SHEEN](#)

In light of the recent debates about the UK's housing crisis, 'Ponte City' at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery is all the more gripping and unnervingly close to home. 'Ponte City' is a documentary-style art installation by South African photographer Mikhael Subotzky and British artist Patrick Waterhouse that presents the current condition of an infamous apartment block in Johannesburg, South Africa. The block, which dates to 1975, was devised as luxury homes for wealthy whites; post-apartheid it became a haven for drugs and crime, and today, occupied but only partially restored, it still bears the shadow of the

ideals by which it was conceived. The exhibition displays the collaborative work of Subotzky and Waterhouse who documented the apartment block between 2007 and 2012.

The room is small but brimming with information. The display is composed of photographs, found objects such as letters, schoolbooks and posters, and old photos. These are stuck to the walls as they might be in a detective's den or on a designer's ideas board and together they tell the apartment block's sad narrative.



Untitled 3, Ponte City, Johannesburg (2008), Mikhael Subotzky & Patrick Waterhouse. Courtesy Goodman Gallery © Magnum Photos

Snapshots of Ponte City's residents fill one gallery wall, in a gridded display that echoes the windows of a tower block with half the lights off. Opposite is a row of large-scale photographs of interior scenes; the people captured are life-size and their poses uncomfortably natural: a woman stoops with a dust-pan and brush in her kitchen of yellow 1970s tiles; some teenagers play on their phone beside a window and a basket

of laundry. They are familiar to the point that it feels intrusive to observe them.

Elsewhere, the artists have synthesised the apartments' luxury 1970s branding with the reality of the block, which has stood abandoned and decaying for much of its life. The slogan 'live your life' is placed as a mocking tagline against an image of rubble, rubbish and graffitied concrete walls. The fusion of fantasy and acute realism makes the building seem like an image of dystopian future that we already inhabit. The final wall is filled with dozens of shots of television screens. They capture something of the contemporary lives of Ponte City's inhabitants, reminding us that this is a snapshot of just one more generation in the life of the building. Ponte City is the product of a city whose history is scarred by inequality and warped dreams; Subotzky and Waterhouse's small and silent documentary about these people is a window into our own world. They and their daily lives are vividly familiar, and the overcrowded reality of urban living that the artists have depicted represents more than one building's story, but a poignant, contemporary message.

'Ponte City: Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse' is at the [Scottish National Portrait Gallery](#), Edinburgh, until 26 April.

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