

# Towering Ambitions: Ponte City at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery

Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse explain how they directly address the architecture of apartheid and its appropriation in their Deutsche Börse Prize nominated exhibition, Ponte City

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Ponte City dominates the Johannesburg skyline, a constant reminder of the utopian ideals of the 1970s created during an economic boom and representing an apartheid-era dream.

Originally built for white sophisticates, the building has developed a multi-dimensional history as represented in the exhibition, which explores not only photography, but found objects as well. "We always wanted to overlay narratives, a way of representing the fact that the building was a crucible for story telling," says Patrick Waterhouse

Like the apartheid itself, the obscure utopian dreams of Ponte City were eroded and the building itself fell into infamy, not for its modernist architecture but for its name becoming synonymous with squatters, drug dealers and prostitution. It remains one of the tallest sky scrapers in South Africa and a "focal point of dreams and nightmares, seen as refuge or monstrosity, dreamland or dystopia, a lightning rod for a society's hopes and fears..."

In the late 2000s, Subotzky and Waterhouse were drawn to investigate this historical and culturally ambiguous structure, as well as its inhabitants, which led to a six-year project utilising photography as well as found objects to explore the meaning of this building within the makeup of South Africa. They did not limit themselves to just exploring photographic portraits of the residents, but instead explored the multi-cultural, narrative rich space through a series of images exploring the architecture, the spaces within spaces, discarded possessions, interviews and promotional material from the building's first opening in the 1970s. It is this overarching narrative which gives the exhibition its story-like feel. Inanimate found objects are given a voice, they are reclaimed as small moments in history.

"Sometimes precious objects were divorced from the people who had left them there, but the fact that they had been left there said something about the lives of the people who lived there; we were really trying to piece together what those narratives meant. It is a continuum of documentation, found objects have a certain truth to them, but the narrative and how we piece them together are often us imposing something on these documents."

The exhibition itself, on first entering, seems to imitate the nature of a tower block. Small and large photographs appear like windows, offering the viewer hints as to what is inside, whether it be people or the slow decay of modernist architecture, and yet the artists do not miss representing the idea of chaos behind these windows as the exhibition develops into a crescendo of chaotic imagery. "In relationship to the Portrait Gallery, there is something very

systematic, done door by door when you first enter, and then a separate space almost, where there are objects you pick up and almost have to rifle through... one of the challenges is bringing together different ways of thinking together.” This notion of collecting together ideas provides a mirror into which we, as viewers, feel like we are uncovering small parts of history through the artists' efforts. We are given the tools to reevaluate the space in order to create a new narrative, a voice separate and yet in acknowledgement of Ponte City's history, unique to every person who steps into the gallery space itself. The exhibition acts almost as an open-ended story, in which we the viewers fill in the blanks.

This exhibition combines the extensive research of two dedicated artists, with the overwhelmingly humanistic power of photographic portraits. Although no one could ever fully understand the legacy of Ponte City's history, hopes, dreams, and future, Subotzky and Waterhouse's exploration goes some way in creating a dialogue between a dystopian myth and reality.