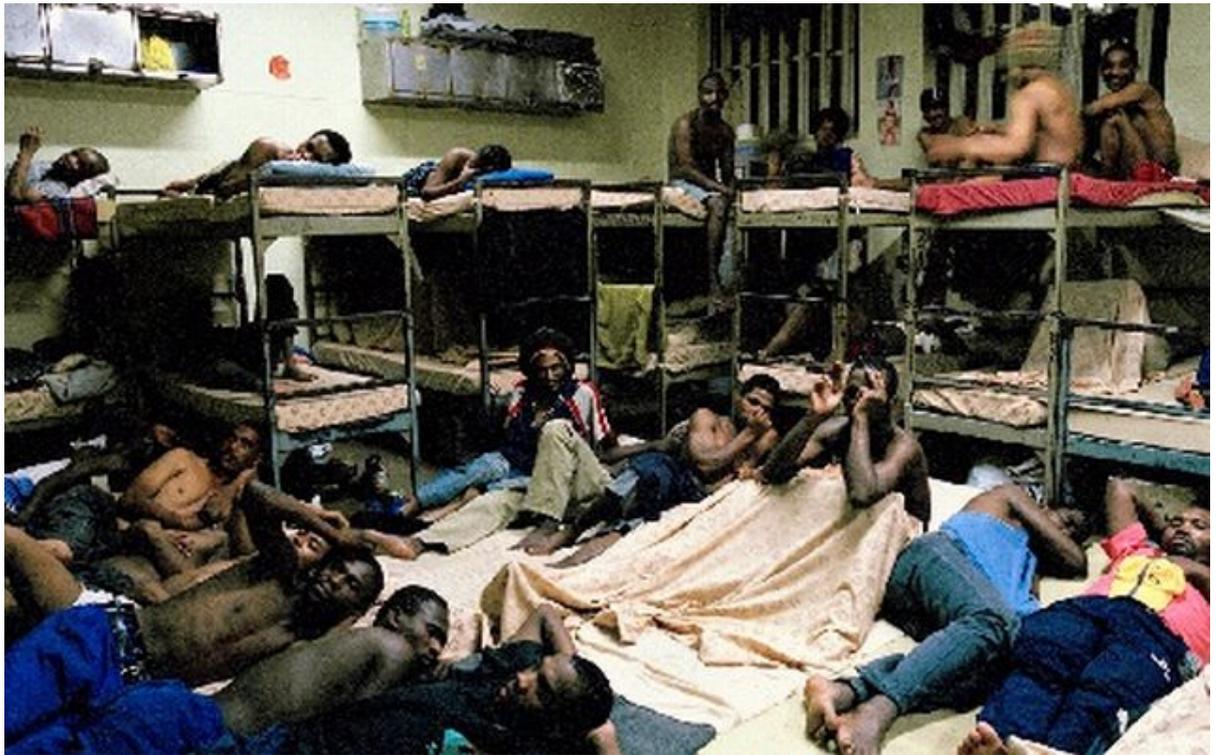




Tending to the scab covering humanity and its violence

BY [SUE BLAINE](#), 27 MARCH 2015, 07:12







SCRATCH the surface of just about any human endeavour and you find frailty. This heartbreaking humanity exudes from artist Mikhael Subotzky's work. From his photographs of Pollsmoor prisoners, through his photographic explorations of former prisoners' lives and the lives of ordinary people in Beaufort West, to dealing with Johannesburg's emblematic Ponte City in photographs and other media, there is this scratching, as if at the scab covering the enduring vulnerability in South African life.

It is Ponte City, the 54-storey building that defines the Johannesburg cityscape, and Subotzky's fascinating, edgy exploration — with UK-based arts editor Patrick Waterhouse — of it, that has earned both men a short-listing for this year's Deutsche Börse Photography Prize.

Also this year, Subotzky has been invited to participate in the 56th Venice Biennale's central exhibition: All the World's Futures.

He is one of 136 artists from 53 countries invited by Venice Biennale curator Okuwi Enwezor to show their work to the more than 300,000 people expected to visit the exhibitions. Some of these people are the world's top curators, art directors, film producers and collectors.

"To be honest, my friends always tease me because I keep saying I will take next year off," says Subotzky, sitting in an office chair in his high-ceilinged studio at Arts on Main on the edge of Johannesburg's old city centre. "But 2015 is special."

April will be busy for the Cape Town-born artist. He is off to London to set up his Deutsche Börse installation, to Venice to install it there and then back to London to attend the Deutsche Börse prize-giving.

"I always dreamed of going to the Venice Biennale, and it's a very exciting programme this year. I am showing work in which I have really extended myself," he says of the Venice-bound video installation on which he has been working for three years.

THE video installation explores images of violence, and Subotzky's attempts to understand violence and his own relationship with it in all its forms. "It's my attempt to delve into violent images in terms of content and physical make-up; and to try to understand my own relationship to them, and the viewer's relationship. It involves microscopes I built myself," he says. He is honour-bound not to reveal more until All the World's Futures kicks off on May 9.

"I've photographed a lot of violence, both explicit and implicit," he says looking back over an impressive 10-year career.

"It took me all this time to realise that, while (my artworks) had been done with the best intentions, to some degree I was unconscious about where my intentions came from. A lot of my exploration of violence is in my work. I am very interested in different forms of violence, from sexism in Hollywood dialogue to extreme physical violence. Also our responses to violence and especially violent images."

In his Venice Biennale curator's statement, Enwezor says All the World's Futures explores how artists, from writers and composers to singers and painters, help people make sense, through their various media, of how to respond to the upheaval in the world.

"One hundred years after the first shots of the First World War were fired in 1914, and 75 years after the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, the global landscape again lies shattered and in disarray, scarred by violent turmoil, panicked by spectres of economic crisis and viral pandemonium, secessionist politics and a humanitarian catastrophe on the high seas, deserts and borderlands, as immigrants, refugees and desperate peoples seek refuge in seemingly calmer and prosperous lands.

"Everywhere one turns new crisis, uncertainty and deepening insecurity across all regions of the world seem to leap into view," Enwezor writes.

While Subotzky is perhaps best known for his photography, and photography was his first medium, he has moved on from but not abandoned it.

SUBOTZKY had not even collected his fine arts degree from the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art when the Goodman Gallery was hanging his photographs of Pollsmoor prisoners on its walls.

"It did surprise me, I was expecting to work as an assistant to an artist. I have been incredibly lucky, since then I have only worked on what I have wanted to."

His first step away from photography was with Ponte City, a six-year collaboration that began in 2008. He took a year's break from the project in 2012 when he was named Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year in visual arts. "I saw it as a huge honour and I wanted to do something challenging and surprising for it."

He came up with Retinal Shift, in which he investigated the practice and mechanics of looking in relation to the history of photographic devices, and his own artistic history. "I bought a camera when I took a gap year," he says, "and I learned a lot from my uncle (photographic artist Gideon Mendel). Pollsmoor was my graduation project. I was very much influenced by David Goldblatt, Guy Tillim and my uncle, and I always preferred exhibiting to publication, I felt there was more freedom."

"It's not my aim to be journalistic. Ponte is also about the mythology around the building, and the lives of the people living there. Everybody's got a Ponte story, and a lot are exaggerated. It's the crucible of Johannesburg's stories about itself. I am documenting the mythology, not the actual story."

IT WAS for Retinal Shift that Subotzky made his first video. Looking back he realises it is less the various media he has employed and more the exploration of relationships that has motivated him.

"I think, in retrospect, photography was a way to place myself in relationships and situations I wouldn't have otherwise been in. I always used to say that my medium is not photography, it is the relationships I find myself in.... In (the Venice installation) I am looking at the medium itself, I am looking at images in general."

But the Venice piece is done, and Subotzky is delving into a new film installation that explores "how we project onto landscapes, and how we look for things in landscapes".

In SA at least, this may mean that once again Subotzky is scratching at the surface of violence.