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## Deutsche Börse Prize 2015, The Photographers' Gallery, review: "stylish and fresh"

This year's shortlist is the most exciting in decades, says Florence Waters



Mikhael Subotzky & Patrick Waterhouse, Ponte City from Yeoville Ridge, 2008 Photo: Mikhael Subotzky / Patrick Waterhouse

**By Florence Waters**

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Never mind that you've probably never heard of the names on this year's Deutsche Börse shortlist, it's the most exciting year I've seen in over a decade. Whereas in the past the prize has tended to reward artists for theory and concept, each room this year presents visually stylish and fresh photographic material.

There's a fashion photographer challenging notions of beauty, an activist challenging homophobia in South Africa, illegal images from Soviet-era Russia, and a post-Apartheid story told through a high-rise apartment block. So who should take the £30,000 prize awarded to an international photographer thought to have contributed the most to photography in Europe, in the year ending September 2014?

Artists Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse (above) tell a fascinating riches-to-rags story of Africa's tallest residential high-rise. Johannesburg's Ponte City once housed desirable light-filled apartments for white elite only; now it's notorious for sheltering drug dens and immigrants from all over Africa.

Taking this as their starting point, along with the unusual cylindrical shape of the building with a well-like "core" running ominously through the centre, they weave together an anthropological project about social aspiration and exclusion. There's lots to take in: ceiling-high light boxes layer the interior views from every single apartment, and Subotzky and Waterhouse have also included archive material such as old adverts and a developer's statement. The project is sprawling, so much so that the poignancy and impact of some of the details - harrowing testimonies left in an abandoned apartment by two young illegal immigrants - can get lost.

South African artist Zanele Muholi discovered her talent for stylish, elegant black-and-white portrait photography quite accidentally. She had photographed a close friend in a women's prison shortly before that friend died, aged 25. She then became inspired to tell the horror stories of homophobic murder, beatings and "curative rape" rife among South Africa's lesbian, gay and transgender communities. The result is this is a wall of fantastic portraits of people staring so defiantly into the lens and out into the exhibition space that you feel very tiny in comparison. It's inspiring.

Zanele Muholi, Vuyelwa Vuvu Makubetse, Daveyton Johannesburg, from the series Faces and Phases, 2013 (Image: Zanele Muholi)

The prize, though, will fall between Viviane Sassen and Nikolai Bakerev. Sassen, a fashion photographer from the Netherlands, has been nominated for her complex and rigorous investigation into photography's illusory hero: the shadow. The shadow is what, in most photographs, lends a subject its form and beauty. But in Sassen's clever body of work, the shadow is form and subject, and denies classical beauty. For Sassen the shadowy "other" is both cultural construct (Jung's alter-ego, for example) but also unique to the eye of each individual. Landscapes, people and abstraction merge in an unforgettable body of work informed by her childhood in Kenya, where thick dark shadows offset heat and color, and represent spaces between life and death.



Viviane Sassen, Axiom GB01, from the series Axiom, 2014 (Image: Viviane Sassen)

Meanwhile, Nikolai Bakerev presents a collection of square group portraits showing semi-clad lovers, families or breast-feeding mothers - taken in Russia in the 1980s but unearthed for Venice Biennale 2013 - the likes of which I have never seen before. The settings are clandestine - many are taken behind bushes - and the posers are invariably naively or extrovertly posed, self-conscious, or rather worried. That's because they were taken during a period when only state photographers were allowed to take photographs. If a family wanted a portrait they went to the arcade and had an official shot, nothing intimate or expressive. As a body of work they ask profound, timely questions about the nature of what is public and what is private and how a society's definition of these crucial spheres affect the behaviour of its people. My money's on Bakerev.





Nikolai Bakharev, No. 70, from the series Relation, 1991-1993 (Image: MAMM, Moscow / Nikolai Bakharev)

Friday to 7 June; winner announced 28 May. Photographer's Gallery, W1, tickets  
020 7087 9300 [thephotographersgallery.org.uk](http://thephotographersgallery.org.uk)