

Today's Ponte: Drugs and gangsters, but mainly on TV screens

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A series of images capturing the warts and warmth of Africa's tallest housing block is up for a 2015 Deutsche Börse Photography prize.



**UPDATE: Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse were named winners of the 2015 Deutsche Börse Photography prize*

South African photographer Mikhael Subotzky is in London where *Ponte City*, the book he created with British artist Patrick Waterhouse, has been shortlisted for the 2015 Deutsche Börse Photography prize. He tells how it was important to change the view of Ponte – Hillbrow's iconic cylindrical residential tower – as part crime scene, part picture postcard.

"The myth around the building was as interesting as the physical structure itself ... the good and the bad. It was built and mythologised to be better than it ever could be. And then in the 1980s and 1990s it was mythologised to be much worse than it ever was," the former Standard Bank Young Artist award-winner explains.

Subotzky and Waterhouse's six-year examination of Ponte and its attempted regeneration becomes an allegory for Johannesburg itself: the rise and fall and rise deferred. "The building is a metaphor for the city, which is a metaphor for the South African condition in the last 30 years," Subotzky says.

The pair wanted to create an accessible narrative using photography. "But we also found that our experience of the building was this multilayered narrative," he says. "Often these stories about the building would contradict each other; [we] kind of liked that these stories all circulated around the building and nobody knows what's truth and what's fiction."

In the Photographers' Gallery in London, where the Deutsche Börse finalists are on show until June 7, Subotzky and Waterhouse's work includes a series of light boxes showing images set out in rows and stacked up in columns that form towers. One consists of photos of doors and doorways, another is of windows and the last tower is a grid of images from television screens.

Rooms with a (flat-screen) view

The two were surprised to find that stunning vistas from Ponte's windows were often obscured by thick curtains. "We realised they weren't looking at their view; they were looking at their television. It became this kind of metaphorical view out of the building," Subotzky says. The TV shows from Hollywood to Nollywood, Congo and South Africa became their escape from Ponte.

"Part of what we were fighting against was all these slightly cliched images of Johannesburg. And we didn't want to tell a story of urban decay. We didn't want to perpetuate this myth that Johannesburg's centre is dangerous and full of squatted buildings. We wanted to tell a story that was true to our experience of Johannesburg, which was often very warm and friendly [with] families living there, and everybody had a big television screen, so we photographed every television," he says.

"The funny thing about the television screens ... is we hear all these stories about drug dealers and prostitutes, and gangsters and violence, about the building and its history. And going through the building we didn't see any of that – but when we started paying attention to what was on the television screen it was all those things, but in this fictionalised way."

Ghosts of tenants past

During the redevelopment they found many personal items that had been abandoned by people evicted in haste – from letters, some in French, and failed asylum applications to personal snapshots.

Waterhouse and Subotzky collected these and superimposed them on to images of the rooms in Ponte, creating a layered narrative.

When it comes to Jo'burgers, says Subotzky, "everybody's got a Ponte story and they often are contradictory. And you can't separate the myth from the reality, so they do stack on top of each other in this weird kind of way."

The immigration issue speaks to Subotzky personally. "I think there is a sense, very subtly, of wanting to deal with my own history of being from [an] immigrant family. And obviously immigration and xenophobia are such hectic issues in South Africa, but I think it's so much more complicated than it's portrayed in the media."

These days Ponte is a very safe place to live, says Subotzky. "It's very secure now; they've fixed it up. It feels like an appropriate place to end the project. Because after all this aspiration to turn the building into something fancy, and the failure of it, and the stories of the decay – it's actually just a functioning building now and it's working- and middle-class people living there."