

SPOTLIGHT: EXHIBITION

APARTHEID, DOCUMENTARY, HAYWARD GALLERY, SOUTH AFRICA

## A new pictorial language for post-apartheid South Africa

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Homeland, Jane Nkuna. From the series Homeland. Loding, former Kwandebele. 2009. © Thabiso Sekgala and Goodman Gallery

**Thabiso Sekgala documented the born-free generation living in the shadow of apartheid. A new exhibition surveying the late photographer's work highlights his unique approach**

Thabiso Sekgala's work stands apart from the straightforward documentary images most often associated with apartheid: explicit depictions of the inhumane living conditions inflicted by a system of institutionalised racial segregation. Photographs characterised by their urgency — the drive to expose the hardships endured by South Africa's nonwhite population. "Sekgala's images have a very accessible and universal feel to them," reflects Tarini Malik, the curator of Sekgala's first UK solo exhibition *Here is Elsewhere* on show at the Hayward Gallery, London. "They speak beyond their subject-matter and draw us into what is a deeply emotional experience."

Sekgala, who took his own life in 2014, was born in 1981 and raised by his grandmother. The photographer grew up between KwaNdebele – one of the 10 territories, known as Bantustans or homelands, created by the apartheid regime to segregate the nonwhite population – and his birthplace, the township of Soweto, Johannesburg. Nonwhites, who had previously lived in urban areas, were forced to relocate to these designated rural areas and travel great distances to reach their places of work. Sekgala experienced this sense of displacement from a young age: regularly journeying from rural KwaNdebele to stay with his mother in the city.





Mawilli Thubane. From the series Homeland. Loding, former Kwandebele. 2009. © Thabiso Sekgala and Goodman Gallery

*“In many ways, his own experience of someone who moved between an urban area and a former homeland really propelled his interest in capturing the youth culture in this rural, transient community”*

*– Tarini Malik, exhibition curator*





Pankop. Passage dividing primary and high school. From the series *Homeland*. Former Kwandebele. 2009. © Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery

“He often spoke about this sense of in-betweenness, ‘this sense of being in one place and thinking about the other,’” remembers John Fleetwood, in an interview published by the Southbank Centre. A former director of Johannesburg’s Market Photo Workshop, Fleetwood taught Sekgala when he attended the school from 2007 to 2008, while he was working part-time at a fast-food outlet to support himself. The title of the exhibition, *Home is Elsewhere*, embodies this sentiment and the lived experience of a population forcibly displaced from their homes. It was Sekgala’s own lived experience that provided the catalyst for his early series *Homeland*, around which the Hayward Gallery exhibition developed.

Created between 2008 and 2011, *Homeland* is one of Thabiso’s most well-known and career-defining bodies of work; it was included in Okwui Enwezor’s landmark touring exhibition *the Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*, which interrogated the dark legacy of apartheid and its ongoing pervasion of everyday life. *Homeland* explores this reality. Photographed almost a decade-and-a-half after the official end of apartheid in 1994, the project captures everyday life in KwaNdebele, and Bophuthatswana — another former homeland.



Thembi Mathebulaor Nzimande. From the series *Homeland*. Siyabuswa, former Kwandebele. 2009. © Thabiso Sekgala and Goodman Gallery

The series comprises portraits of the “born-free generation” — children who were born, and grew up, during the revolutionary period following the end of apartheid — and landscape shots of their surroundings in the former homelands. “In many ways, his own experience of someone who moved between an urban area and a former homeland really propelled his interest in capturing the youth culture in this rural, transient community,” says Malik, the exhibition’s curator. For the youth depicted in these images, the notion of home remains complex: the spaces that they now freely inhabit retain the scars of the political and social system from which they were conceived.

South Africa’s dark political history had a profound influence on the development of photography in the country. The generation of practitioners proceeding Sekgala and his peers had pioneered a straightforward, photojournalistic approach — “struggle” photography that captured the hardship of the nonwhite population with candid directness. However, a number of photographers were beginning to redefine the medium, turning their lenses inwards to explore a post-apartheid world through their personal experiences. *Homeland* embodies this shift: rather than make explicit references to the complex political and social context of the subject matter, the images subtly allude to a darker, underlying narrative.



Johanna Mthombeni. From the series Homeland.2009. © Thabiso Sekgala and Goodman Gallery

*“The photograph of the girl and the lampshade [...] made me think of how my grandmother came with furniture given by her employers in the city”*

*– Thabiso Sekgala*





Landmark. From the series *Homeland*. Troya, former Kwandebele. 2009. © Thabiso Sekgala and Goodman Gallery

In one still, a young girl wearing a yellow blouse holds our gaze beneath a decorative lampshade of the same colour, while in another a stone marking the border of a former homeland glows golden in the evening sun. “The photograph of the girl and the lampshade [...] made me think of how my grandmother came with furniture given by her employers in the city,” explained Sekgala, in a text published in the anthology *Shoe Shop*, a collection of reflections on Africa, movement, public art, migration and beauty. “... For me, this image talks about how items from the urban areas came to the rural areas.”

The exhibition comprises 50 images drawn from *Homeland* and five additional series. “Sekgala’s style was consistent,” says Malik. “From his ability to capture a quietly defiant facial expression to his distinct colour palette, there is a thread that binds his work ... the exhibition hopes to illustrate that.” The different series on show are also united by their exploration of the notion of home, and the social, political, or economic conditions that may shape our relationship to it. In *Paradise* (2013) Sekgala reflects on experiences of displacement, migration and the concept of paradise across different cultural spheres, while in *Second Transition* (2012) he explores the extreme inequality of South Africa in the context of the mining town of Rustenburg.



Tiger. From the series Second Transition. 2012. © Thabiso Sekgala and Goodman Gallery

“The motivation for the show was to illustrate that this photographer, who came from such a specific political and troubled history, was able to create work that is so universal,” says Malik. “What I really want people to take away from the exhibition is the sense that you may not have had the same lived experience, or history, as a subject but you can take something away from it that resonates with your own life.”

*Thabiso Sekgala: Here is Elsewhere is on show at the Hayward Gallery until 06 October 2019.*

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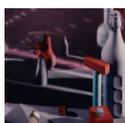
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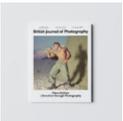
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