

Galería Elba Benítez



David Goldblatt . In Memoriam (1930-2018)

November 2018 – January 2019

Although he had been actively photographing as early as his teenage years in the 1940s, the late South African photographer David Goldblatt did not dedicate himself full-time to photography until the 1960s, after selling the family-owned clothing business he had inherited from his recently deceased father. Having committed himself to his chosen medium, he soon embarked on an ambitious project: a photographic study of the mines of South Africa, mines that had by that point fallen into irreversible decline but that even in their decadence still emblemized and even embodied the prodigious wealth, as well as the commensurate and systemic inequality, on which South Africa and its society had been built. These photographs would eventually be published in 1973 as *On the Mines*, Goldblatt's first photography book; a judicious selection of those same photographs makes up the exhibition *David Goldblatt . In Memoriam (1930-2018)*, currently on view at the Galería Elba Benítez.

Goldblatt's *On the Mines* documents the structures, labor systems and living conditions of South Africa's gold (and, on occasion, platinum) mines. Its approach to the overall mining enterprise might be considered vertical, assaying the system as a whole from top to bottom, with photographic settings ranging from the plush sunlit headquarters in Johannesburg's proud early skyscrapers to the deep subterranean shafts in all their deafening infernality. The photographs themselves are technically exquisite: at times they achieve a stunning formal beauty in their static, noun-oriented representation of people and places and things; at other times they capture the all-but-unphotographable

flashing moments of the furious, explosive-based and extremely dangerous shaft mining processes (has this ever been photographed elsewhere?). Ultimately, however, through Goldblatt's combination of controlled photographic technique, incisive personal vision, and informed political engagement, *On the Mines* voices a powerful protest against the injustices on which the racist and rapacious apartheid system in its entirety once rested, a protest that continues to resonate globally today.

And yet at the same time, *On the Mines* also portrays, with dignity and poignancy, the individuals who lived and worked 'on the mines,' whether they be miners, merchants, administrators or executives. Indeed, while *On the Mines* (like all of Goldblatt's work) operates simultaneously on multiple levels — as documentation, as protest, as cultural history, as portraiture — it is this sense of shared yet individually manifested humanity that is perhaps most powerfully transmitted in these images of men and man-made things. In this regard, Goldblatt himself recounted a telling incident that took place in the course of his project:

“Permission had been given me by 'head office' to take photographs in the hostel. Without consulting me the hostel manager sent out an instruction that men of each tribal group were to present themselves to me in tribal dress. I had no desire to do ethnographic 'studies' and was preparing to withdraw. But then I saw the men and that they took the occasion very seriously and with great dignity. And so I photographed several groups.”

The portraits that resulted from this encounter (some of which are on view in the exhibition at the Galería Elba Benítez) are extraordinary: vivid, complex and layered to a deeply affecting degree of immediacy. But beyond the considerable formal accomplishment of the individual photographs, Goldblatt's accompanying anecdote reveals a crucial component of his larger, defining ethos. Initially, Goldblatt recoiled at the thought of carrying out ethnographic 'studies': such use of the camera would have been anathema to his deeply held (and by definition *a priori*) political convictions. But when literally face-to-face with his photographic subject, an even deeper conviction of Goldblatt's arose and was compellingly activated: his conviction that there exists an undeniable and inalienable human dignity, a dignity that -- again, vertically, from top to bottom -- transcends the systems and structures (also human-made) into which it is so often and so cruelly entrapped. It was this conviction that prevailed at that pivotal moment of Goldblatt's first major, self-assigned and personally resonant photographic project, yielding *On the Mines*; it was this conviction, in the larger arc, that defined all his work; and it is this conviction that guarantees its lasting place in this, our, world.

George Stolz

David Goldblatt (Randfontein, South Africa, 1930; Johannesburg, 2018) documented the harsh complexities of South Africa with a combination of profound intimacy and profound outrage. From the onset his photography was based on protest – informed, passionate, yet never vitriolic or propagandistic -- first against South Africa's oppressive apartheid policies, and later against the post-apartheid conditions that still wreak havoc on the nation's social fabric. Goldblatt's photographs, whether of people, places or buildings, are carefully, often beautifully composed, but they are never self-consciously virtuosic. Instead, they possess the muted directness of the commonplace, an ease with emptiness, an affinity for the oblique and the quiet.

David Goldblatt had solo exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou (Paris, 2018); the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (2014); the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson (Paris, 2010); the Jewish Museum (New York, 2010); the New Museum (New York, 2009); the Serralves Museum (Oporto, 2008); Fotomuseum Winterthur (2007); Camera Austria (Graz, 2006); Hasselblad Center (Göteborg, 2006); Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) (2002); South African National Gallery (Cape Town, 1999); Museum of Modern Art (New York, 1998) and elsewhere. He participated in Documenta 12 (2007) and Documenta 11 (2002), as well as the 54th La Biennale di Venezia (Venice, 2011). Goldblatt received the 2006 Hasselblad Award, the 2009 Henri Cartier-Bresson Award, and was the 2010 Lucie Award Lifetime Achievement Honoree. Currently, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (Sydney) has organized a major retrospective of his work.

David Goldblatt . In Memoriam (1930-2018) is the artist's fourth solo show at the Galería Elba Benítez. This exhibition was organized in collaboration with Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Image: David Goldblatt, *Shaftsinking: the cactus grab has dumped the last load of big rocks in the kibble, now the men clear the smaller rocks from the bottom, lashing the kibble with shovels. President Steyn No. 4 Shaft, Welkom, Orange Free State, June 1969* (detail)