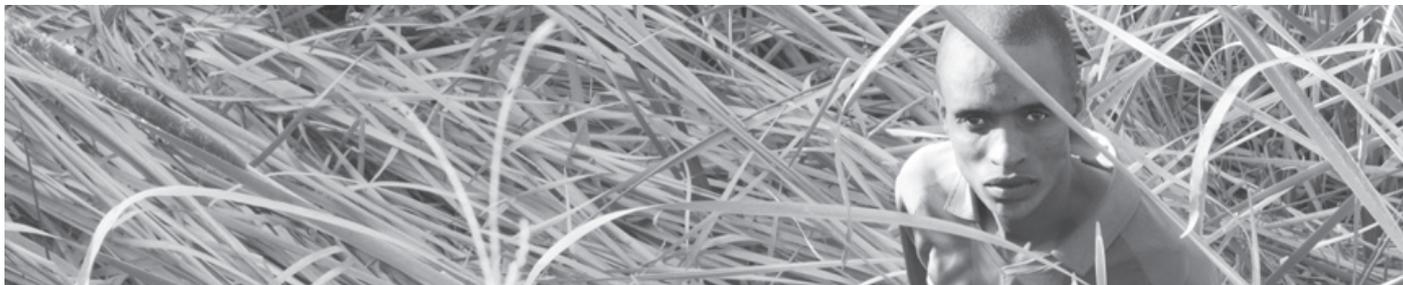


david goldblatt

Ex Offenders at the Scene of Crime

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September - October 2012
opening: thursday, September 20th,



According to **David Goldblatt**, his recent photographic project *Ex Offenders at the Scene of Crime* – a series of portraits of individuals convicted of having committed crimes in South Africa, where crime rates are among the highest in the world, and the threat of crime an inescapable part of daily life for every stratum of society -- began as a question:

My interest in ex-offenders arises from a wish to know who are the people who are doing the crimes and to get a sense of their life and how they came to crime. Could these people be my children? Could they be you? Or me? I have no 'agenda'. Perhaps that is why very often ex-offenders talk very openly to me. I am not a magistrate or a judge or a lawyer or a social worker or an activist. I think that for some, this has been the first opportunity they have had to tell their story without being judged.

The answer to Goldblatt's questioning is *Ex Offenders at the Scene of Crime*, a gripping series of photograph-and-text portraits currently on view at the **Elba Benitez Gallery**. The photographs in *Ex Offenders* follow a basic format. Each is a medium-size black-and-white photographic portrait taken at the site where a crime was committed. All are accompanied by 'statements' about the crimes based on the words of their perpetrators – petty shoplifters, celebrity bank robbers, rapists, thieves, jealous lovers, police torturers and murderers. These men and women who have agreed to sit for Goldblatt have served their prison sentences and are making explicit efforts to 'go straight' in the difficult outside world – hence Goldblatt's careful choice of referring to his subjects not as 'criminals' but rather as 'ex offenders.' Stylistically, and keeping within the parameters of Goldblatt's oeuvre, the photographs are sober and almost austere; similarly, the statements are straightforward, neither interpretive nor adorned. The subjects of the portraits have all been paid a fee for their participation, and Goldblatt will donate his share of the proceeds for the sale of the work to organizations dedicated to the education and rehabilitation of prisoners.

Ex Offenders – which was featured in the 54th Venice Biennial in 2011-- is very much in keeping with the rest of David Goldblatt's ongoing project (60 years long at this point) of documenting the harsh complexities of South Africa with a combination of profound intimacy and profound outrage. In this sense, *Ex Offenders* in fact belongs to a larger, overarching act of portraiture – a portrayal of a country, as beloved as it is scarred. It is a composite portrait, composed of details and composed across time, but always rooted in a sense of place, and always informed by a passionate sense of individual humanity that, in the specific case of *Ex Offenders*, recognizes that neither victim nor victimizer are numbers: they – which is to say we -- are people. As Emmanuel Luthuli, a convicted rapist and 'ex offender', told Goldblatt, "one of the things that I learned in prison is that a person is a person because of other people."

David Goldblatt (South Africa, 1930) began photographing full-time in the early 1960's. From the onset his photography has been based on protest – informed, passionate, yet never 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, such as poverty and untenable living conditions, the inequitable distribution of wealth, the as-yet-unhealed racial fissures, and the horrific scourge of AIDS. Goldblatt has had individual exhibitions at major museums around the world such as MoMA(1998), MACBA (2002), Museu Serralves (2008), the New Museum (2009) and the Jewish Museum (2010). He has participated in numerous group exhibitions like Documenta 11 (2002), Documenta 12 (2007), 29th São Paulo Biennial (2010), and ILLUMInazioni/ILLUMInations 54th Venice Biennale (2011), among others. His work belongs to collections such as those of MoMA, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Stedelijk Museum and the South African National Gallery. He has received the Hasselblad Award, the Henri Cartier-Bresson Award and the Lucie Award for Lifetime Achievement, and he is the founder of the Market Photography Workshop in Johannesburg. This is Goldblatt's third show at the Elba Benitez Gallery, following *In the Time of AIDS* in 2009.

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George Stolz

Ex-Offenders at the Scene of Crime

Very many of us in South Africa have been the victims of crime, often violent. With great stress and cost we try to protect our persons and property. Yet withal, we remain extremely vulnerable to attack by people who would rob, wound or kill us.

Having been a victim I asked myself who are the people who are doing crime? Are they monsters? Ordinary people? Could they be my children? Are they you and me? I wanted to burrow under the statistics, meet some of the doers of crime, do portraits of them and hear from them about their lives and what they had done.

Who to photograph? I did not want to photograph prisoners in jail. I wanted to meet perpetrators as 'ordinary' people not as institutional ciphers. So, mostly through organisations dealing with prisoner rehabilitation, I came to people who had done crime or been accused of it. If they had been in prison, they were now free or on parole.

Where to do the photographs? The scene of crime was the place I chose. Here life-changing events had probably been experienced both by victims and perpetrators.

Thus these photographs and the stories of the people within them. Most were trying, often in desperately difficult circumstances, to go straight. Hence I call them not criminals, not offenders, but ex-offenders. I have paid each of these subjects R800 (about 80 Euros) and they have signed a release giving me permission to publish and exhibit the photographs and their life stories.

I warn each of my subjects that publication and exhibition might, at some later stage in life, damage them, and I proceed only if they fully understand what they are doing and agree to doing it.

I undertake to make no money out of this work. All proceeds above gallery commission are given to organisations dealing with the education and rehabilitation of prisoners.

David Goldblatt