

# David Goldblatt

NO ULTERIOR MOTIVE

**D**avid Goldblatt (1930-2018) scrupulously examined the history and politics of South Africa, where he witnessed the rise of apartheid, its divisive and brutal policies, and its eventual demise. His sensitive photographs offer a view of daily life under the apartheid system and its complex aftermath. Goldblatt was drawn, in his own words, “to the quiet and commonplace where nothing ‘happened’ and yet all was contained and immanent.” Accompanied by precise captions, his images expose everyday manifestations of racism and point to Black dispossession—economic, social, and political—under white rule.

The grandson of Lithuanian Jews who had fled Europe in the 1890s, Goldblatt spent most of his life in Johannesburg. Although not part of the ascendant Dutch Protestant community, his position as a white man allowed him greater freedom of movement and he leveraged this privilege to document life in South Africa as honestly and straightforwardly as possible. In the early 1970s, he placed a classified ad: “I would like to photograph people in their homes [...]. No ulterior motive.” Yet this professed impartiality masked a critical perspective toward South Africa’s people, history, and geography.

Goldblatt first took up the camera in 1948, the year the apartheid system was introduced, and over the next seven decades he assiduously photographed South Africa’s people, landscape, and built environment. Recognizing the layered connections in his oeuvre, this exhibition proceeds thematically rather than chronologically: here, black-and-white photographs taken during the period of institutionalized segregation are interwoven with his work in color from the 1990s on. Six thematic sections explore Goldblatt’s engagement with apartheid, its contradictions, and its multifaceted legacy.

## 01 / INFORMALIDAD

### INFORMALITY

Goldblatt’s photographs, especially his portraits, ask us to consider the informal and often idiosyncratic ways people resist oppression. Attuned to how his status and relative freedom as a white man influenced all social encounters, Goldblatt gained access to intimate moments of South Africans’ everyday lives by thoughtfully avoiding behavior that might suggest an exercise of authority. Instead, he observed how frequently people segregated by law engaged in unsanctioned social and economic exchanges. Whether photographing descendants of Dutch colonists farming in the rural Cape in the early 1960s for the series *Some Afrikaners Photographed*, or a young Black couple in Johannesburg, Goldblatt emphasized the improvised realities of everyday life. This interest shifted in later years to the housing and mercantile arrangements dubbed South Africa’s “informal economy,” as well as to unofficial monuments to historical figures and events.

## 02 / TRABAJADORES

### WORKING PEOPLE

Even as the architects of apartheid sought to separate South Africans, the system functioned through an economic structure that placed people into tense proximity on a daily basis. White families hired Black workers to raise their children and clean their homes; mines owned and managed by whites depended on people of color to perform the most dangerous labor. Government-dictated racial categories profoundly shaped the jobs that people could hold, creating strict hierarchies in workplaces. Goldblatt highlighted these inequalities with pictures like one of a domestic worker rushing to meet her employer. At the same time, he attended to how people retained a sense of self and dignity in their labor, as in his portraits of mineworkers who chose to pose for his camera in their traditional clothing.

## 03 / EXTRACCIÓN

### EXTRACTION

Born in the mining town of Randfontein, Goldblatt began his career by looking at the extractive economy built by colonial ventures to exploit its natural resources. Goldblatt created his earliest series, *On the Mines* (1964–73), while working as a photographer for the country’s biggest mining corporations. The series showed how a predominantly Black migrant labor force performed the most dangerous work in gold and platinum mines, work that primarily enriched their white bosses. Decades later, the photographer found similar manifestations of inequality while recording the toxic legacy of asbestos mining and its disproportionate impact on Black communities.

## 04 / CERCA/LEJOS

### NEAR/FAR

The white supremacist National Party, led by Afrikaners (descendants of predominantly Dutch settlers) and English-speaking whites, attempted to impose distance between people of different racial categories in South Africa. Goldblatt looked at how the National Party government pulled people from their homes to realize its vision of racial segregation, dispossessing and dispersing Black and Indian residents to make room for new white neighborhoods.

However, the exclusive urban centers the party sought to create could not function without a daily influx of laborers and domestic workers from the country’s diverse population. Goldblatt was interested in the ways closeness continued to manifest even when distance was dictated by law, a status quo that also affected his relationship with the people he photographed. These images wryly register the constant collision of segregated groups in public and private spaces throughout the country.

## 05 / INCRECULIDAD

### DISBELIEF

The illogic of apartheid led to widespread skepticism and practices of self-delusion among those who actively perpetuated the system. The photographs in this section capture the sense of disbelief with the labyrinthine, endlessly rewritten laws intended to legitimize a morally bankrupt system of abuse and oppression. Goldblatt rendered this state of affairs in brilliant deadpan, giving visual form to the incredulity that all but the most cynical and opportunistic beneficiaries of apartheid must have felt. Fortress-like churches of the Dutch Reformed Protestant faith mix with absurd scenes of suburban leisure in whites-only areas, while stony or stoic gazes meet moments of sudden demolition. Even after the official end of apartheid, Goldblatt continued to photograph sites that inspired feelings of disbelief as seen in his photographs of incomplete housing developments.

## 06 / CONGREGACIÓN

### ASSEMBLY

How do people come together in a country divided by segregation? In everything, from the bench they could sit on to where they could live, South Africans were physically separated by race. In the 1950s, protests against these new policies were common, but in the decades that followed, the government introduced increasingly brutal tactics to repress dissent and severely curtailed the right to assemble.

Goldblatt avoided straightforward depictions of open rebellion, seeing his country’s political struggles as clearly in the routine occasions that brought people together by choice or necessity. In later decades, he engaged more with overtly political subjects, turning his camera to newly elected lawmakers and young South Africans openly protesting colonial legacies in their post-apartheid society.

CONNECTIONS

DÍALOGOS

REDES PARA LA FOTOGRAFÍA SUDAFRICANA

NETWORKS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Beyond his own work, Goldblatt was committed to aiding future generations of South African photographers. He helped found the Market Photo Workshop in 1989 to offer instruction and support to emerging, socially engaged photographers, hoping the school would be “a small counter to the ethnic surgery that had so successfully separated South Africans under apartheid.” Today, it remains a center of education and community for photography in Johannesburg. Lebohlang Kganyo, Sabelo Mlangeni, Ruth Seopedi Motau, and Zanele Mholi are alumni with close ties to Goldblatt, who was a friend and mentor. All have explored themes of belonging, loss, memory, migration, and representation while uncovering original, often deeply personal ways to examine South Africa’s people, places, and policies.

Like Goldblatt, the artists in this gallery—Ernest Cole, Santu Mofokeng, and Jo Ractliffe—use the camera to reflect critically on their country’s society and politics. Cole used his camera to confront sweeping social, political, and environmental change from the 1950s to the 1980s. Mofokeng was a member of the Afrapix collective of South African documentary photographers throughout the 1980s. A former student of Goldblatt, he received his first long-term position in photography in part through Goldblatt’s recommendation. Ractliffe’s landscape photographs address issues of displacement and conflict, capturing the traces of often violent histories. She knew Goldblatt as a friend and colleague and has taught at the Market Photo Workshop, a vitally important school for photography in Johannesburg whose alumni are featured in gallery 3.