Michael Godby 823 words

Goldblatt, David

David Goldblatt, who is generally considered to be South Africa’s leading photographer of his own, or any other generation, was born in Randfontein in the former Transvaal in 1930, into a family that had fled from the pogroms in Lithuania in the 1890s. The landscape of Goldblatt’s youth on the Witwatersrand was characterised, on the one hand, by the gold-mining industry that was still central to the South African economy and, on the other, by more or less marginalized Afrikaner communities that eked out a primitive existence on small-holdings. Goldblatt’s early photography negotiated his relationship with these two distinct communities and it is clear that these essays contributed to the development of both his political identity and his photographic vision. However, unlike more developed countries in the North, South Africa at this time could not sustain a career in documentary photography and Goldblatt was obliged for many years to make time for what he has always called “personal work” between commercial commissions. It has only been since the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, and the opening of that country to international fine art markets, that Goldblatt has been able to concentrate on his own work on a regular basis.

Goldblatt’s connection with Modernism may be understood to have occurred in two forms. First, his early work, indeed his very ambition to become a photographer, was modelled on the image he discovered in the great international picture magazines of the fifties such as *Life*, *Look* and *Picture Post*. And, while he soon found out that he lacked the temperament for sustained activist photography, he determined to use his first professional position as picture editor of the *South African Tatler* to introduce the latest international trends in magazine photography into that country: his work for the magazine, both editorial and advertising, is characterized by spectacular camera angles, brutal cropping, dramatic tonal contrasts and radical compositions. However, although his work in this vein quickly established a local and international reputation, Goldblatt, while still at the *Tatler* but especially in the process of producing his first two books *On the Mines* (1973) and *Some Afrikaners Photographed* (1975) from material he had started at the magazine, gradually turned away from this rhetorical manner towards what he called at the time a “contemplative approach”. Goldblatt acknowledges that the influence of Walker Evans replaced that of David Bailey and others of the London School, and that this change in vision was greatly assisted by his decision to use a medium format camera alongside his familiar Leica, but the real significance of this change was that instead of romanticising or exoticising his subject, he was now able to look at it in its own terms, and gauge his own relationship with it. In fact his graduation from ‘shouting to talking’, as he put it in an interview in 1987, has affected all his subsequent work in which he has cast a cool eye on South African society even while it was traumatised by apartheid or swept up in revolutionary change. For example, in In Boksburg (1982), Goldblatt applied this vision in a devastating analysis of small town, segregated South Africa; in his magnum opus, *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then* (1998), he complemented his inventory of South African architecture, especially monuments, with thoroughly researched captions on its history and significance; and in *Intersections* (2005), discarding imported conventions for the representation of landscape, he demanded the attribution of significance to apparently meaningless – but typically South African - terrain.

List of Works – Books by Goldblatt

(1975) Some Afrikaners Photographed, Johannsburg: Murray Crawford.

(1982) In Boksburg, Cape Town: Gallery Press.

(1986) Lifetimes: Under Apartheid, with Nadine Gordimer, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

(1989) The Transported of KwaNdebele: A South African Odyssey, with Brenda Goldblatt and Philip van Niekerk, New York: Aperture Books.

(1998) South Africa: The Structure of Things Then, with the essay ‘Constructs: Reflections on a Thinking Eye’ by Neville Dubow, Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

(2005) David Goldblatt – Intersections, Munich: Prestel, 2005.

(2010) TJ/Double Negative: Johannesburg Photographs, 1948-2010, with Ivan Vladislavic, Cape Town: Umuzi.

References and Further Reading

Watson, S. (1990) ‘A Version of Melancholy’, ADA (SA), 1st and 2nd Quarters.

Lawson, L. (2000) ‘David Goldblatt’s Johannesburg’ in *Rhizomes of Memory: tre sorafrikanske fotografer*, Oslo: Hennie Onstad Kunstsenter.

Goldblatt, D. with Diserens, C. and Enwezor, O. (eds.) (2001) David Goldblatt, fifty-one years, with essays by J.M. Coetzee, Corinne Diserens, Okwui Enwezor, Michael Godby, Nadine Gordimer, Chris Killip and Ivan Vladislavic, Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona.

Parr, M. (ed.) (2006) David Goldblatt, with the essay ‘David Goldblatt, One Book at a Time’ by Rory Bester, Milan: Contrasto.