

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

ART SY

*Photographer David Goldblatt Chronicled
Apartheid in Profoundly Intimate Images*

by Charlotte Jansen (September 4, 2020)



David Goldblatt, *Self-portrait at Consolidated Main Reef Mines, Rodepoort, 1967*. Courtesy of Goodman Gallery.

How can we understand violence? Over six decades and an extraordinary body of work, the legendary late photographer David Goldblatt sought to understand forms of violence—structural and primordial, visible and invisible—inflicted not only human bodies and culture, but on the Earth itself.

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



David Goldblatt. *Shop assistant, Orlando West*, 1972. Goodman Gallery.

Goldblatt was born in 1930 in the gold-mining town of Randfontein; his grandparents had fled persecution of Jews in Lithuania and settled in South Africa in the late 19th century. He began taking photographs, albeit as an amateur, in 1948; that same year, South Africa's right-wing National Party was elected. It was the beginning of nearly 50 years of apartheid.



David Goldblatt. *Rochelle and Samantha Adkins, Hillbrow*, 1972. Goodman Gallery.

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

By the time Goldblatt began his professional career in photography in 1962, South Africa was segregated in every sense—80% of the land was legally claimed for white people, forcing millions of Black South Africans from their homes. Goldblatt would go on to shoot portraits of prime ministers and presidents for *Leadership*, as well as commissions for international magazines including *Tatler*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Paris Match*, and *The Observer* in the U.K. Towards the end of his career and his life (he died in June 2018), Goldblatt began to focus more on the terrain of South Africa, taking landscape pictures. He focused in particular on the small, barren hills that lie between Johannesburg and Cape Town, land he described as “soft and round from a distance but when you get onto them...incredibly harsh and unkind,” he explained in *The Last Interview* (2018), a published conversation with Alexandra Dodd, which took place shortly before his death at age 87.



David Goldblatt, *Anna Lebako, a washerwoman from Soweto carrying the week's laundry to a white suburban family, Harrow Road, 1961*. Goodman Gallery.

Yet looking at Goldblatt's earlier, contemplative photographs from this blistering period of brutality, you do not see the violence or the protests. Goldblatt rarely showed what the vociferous press wanted to see; he wasn't interested in sensationalism or making instrumental images. He photographed sites of protest and places where monuments had been torn down; he went to the gold-mining communities that played a major role in the South African economy in the 1960s and '70s and photographed Black mothers who traveled to the city to look after white children, leaving their own behind; he met with ex-offenders and asked them to return to scenes of their crimes. The violence is always present—but never a spectacle.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



David Goldblatt, *Baby with child-minders and dogs in the Alexandra Street Park, Hillbrow, 1972*. Goodman Gallery.

Goldblatt steered away from traditional reportage and photojournalism and rejected the term “artist,” instead calling himself a “self-appointed observer and critic” and an “outsider.” “I am not an activist,” he explained in “The Last Interview.” “I very seldom take an active stand on something.” On the occasions he did take a stand, however, it was powerful. In 2011, for example, he refused an Order of Ikhamanga Silver medal in protest against the Protection of State Information bill being passed in Parliament during Jacob Zuma’s presidency.

Goldblatt attempted to understand the violence that was happening around him in a profoundly personal way. He also understood well his own position as a white man in South Africa with a camera, and the violence of the photograph. “I’ve always said quite explicitly that I can never deny my complicity in the South African scene during apartheid because to draw breath here—just to draw breath—you became complicit,” he said in “The Last Interview.” “There was no aspect of life in South Africa that was not pervasively penetrated by apartheid. No life, and no aspect of life.”

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



David Goldblatt, *'Location in the sky': the servants' quarters of Essanby house. Jeppe Street, Johannesburg. 4 April 1984., 1984.* Goodman Gallery.



David Goldblatt, *The house-painter and his family, Pretoria Street, Hillbrow, January 1973., 1973.* Goodman Gallery.

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

This past August, during a panel discussion on Goldblatt's legacy organized by Goodman Gallery—which has represented the photographer since 1999—curator Bongive Dhlomo explained the feeling of “I am here, and you are there” that emanates from Goldblatt's portrait photographs. “He acknowledges his role in this transaction,” she added, referring to the dynamic between the photographer and his subjects.



David Goldblatt, *She said to him 'You be the driver and I'll be the madam,' then they picked up the fender and posed, Hillbrow, 1975.* Goodman Gallery.



David Goldblatt, *Walking the 'madam's' dog, Hillbrow, 1972.* Goodman Gallery.

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

This summer, Goodman Gallery held Goldblatt's first major solo exhibition in the U.K. since 1986 at its London space. The show, "Johannesburg 1948–2018," included a collection of striking portraits from the 1960s and '70s, taken in the township of Soweto. Many of the pictures were taken before the 1976 Soweto uprising, a demonstration against the compulsory use of Afrikaans in schools, which turned violent when protestors clashed with police. But once again, it is hard to imagine what the people we see were experiencing in their day-to-day lives. These are intimate scenes, quiet moments, with individuals or couples at home, framed at a respectful distance. Names of people and places are carefully attributed—agency is paramount in these pictures.

"I deal in impossibilities because you can't squeeze into that little rectangle all of the complexities of reality," Goldblatt said, recognizing the dangers of the photograph. "I find myself cautioning myself about the ease of falling into patterns. When it's comfortable, you don't have to rethink things. In photography this happens very easily."

Goldblatt was concerned with South Africa—its structures, its geography, his compatriots. And there's no doubt that his work speaks to a South African audience with depth and nuance that a foreigner could not grasp. Yet Goldblatt's work has been revered across the world, and this is perhaps due to the way it touches, even in spite of itself, on the fundamental aspects of humanity. He posits photography as a conversation—with oneself, and with the world. Goldblatt said, "Democracy is about talking. Quintessentially, undeniably, that is what democracy is about."



David Goldblatt, *Cup final, Orlando Stadium, Soweto, 1972*. Goodman Gallery.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

In the face of incomprehensible violence like apartheid, photography might seem, as Goldblatt wrote in a letter in 1987, like a “paltry” preoccupation. Yet he was always presciently aware of what his photographs might impart and how they would hold the past—a period that is ineradicable from South Africa’s future, that reverberated throughout the world, and that should not be forgotten.

As important as the body of work he left behind (his archive was acquired by Yale University) was his role as a founder of the Market Photo Workshop in 1989. There, he trained South Africans who would have no access to photography otherwise. It has ensured to some degree that South Africans continue to be the chroniclers of their own reality. The institution’s graduates include the award-winning visual activist Zanele Muholi.



David Goldblatt, *Cafe-de-Move-On, Braamfontein, Johannesburg.*
November 1964., 1964. Goodman Gallery.

Brenda Goldblatt, David’s daughter, told Artsy that for her, the work is “a unique record of a time and place, told with a deep humanity, a profound sense of belonging, and an acute intelligence.” These are the qualities that have been so widely influential and have changed the genre of documentary and reportage photography significantly ever since.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



David Goldblatt, *Makana Tshabalala and Ntsiki Kabane*,
Rockville, Dube, Soweto, 1970. Goodman Gallery.

“For my father, photography was a vital act,” she added, “a process of sense-making in a harsh and complex world, and that sense-making is available to anyone who looks at the work now and in the future—it is inviolate.”

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM