

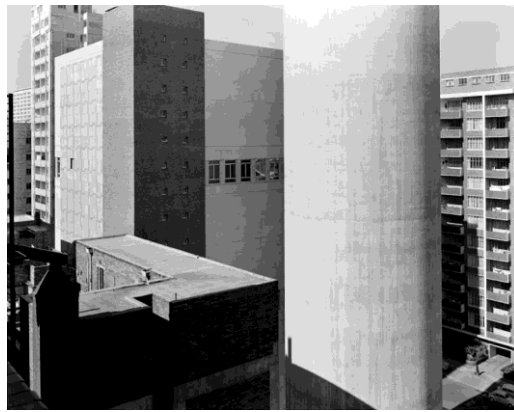
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PLACES

## *David Goldblatt and the Indeterminate Landscape*

*The South African photographer produced a powerful visual record of the nation's injustices during and after the apartheid era.*

By Ella Mudie (November 2019)



David Goldblatt, Hillbrow Tower and various buildings, Johannesburg. June 1972  
[All images courtesy Goodman Gallery © The David Goldblatt Legacy Trust.]

The South African photographer David Goldblatt was 87 when he died in 2018, but he was at work until the end on “a still developing photographic narrative” both visual and textual. In an episode of the Art21 documentary series titled *Johannesburg*, made in the months prior to his passing, we see him driving around his hometown, reflecting candidly on his life and practice. At one point, Goldblatt pulls over, climbs out of his white Land Cruiser, and sets up to photograph a sleek commercial tower with a tinted glass façade. “It seems to me,” he remarks, “that the style of architecture that is emerging to the north of Johannesburg is a kind of aggressive materialism.”

The scene is a reminder that architecture remained central across Goldblatt’s career, which spanned more than 70 years and has recently been surveyed in major exhibitions in Paris and Sydney. The latter show, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, was realized in close collaboration with the artist, and became a tribute of sorts. I live in Sydney, and was especially struck at the MCA by Goldblatt’s images of physical constructions — houses and housing estates, farms, churches, shops, industrial sites, monuments, civic buildings — which fascinated him as reflections of “the choices we and our forebears have taken.” These photographs encapsulate important information about the spatial design of apartheid.

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Architecture remained central across Goldblatt's long career. Yet his archive is remarkably open-ended in its framing of built space in South Africa — and beyond.

Yet to parse Goldblatt's art exclusively as evidence of this architecture of division is to risk overdetermining a visual archive that is, in fact, remarkably open-ended in its framing of built space in South Africa — and beyond. Goldblatt is well-known for picturing the concrete constructions that made his country modern at mid-century, for instance, or the defensive designs for religious buildings that were material demonstrations of the mindset of apartheid. Less frequently acknowledged is his interest in incomplete or partially demolished buildings, in razed fields, rubble, and waste. Such scenes of the built environment and its entropic residues resist easy interpretation; his images are often ambiguous as to whether a given structure is being destroyed or remade, and this indeterminacy speaks to ways in which buildings are appropriated and repurposed in response to sociopolitical shifts. His carefully worded, caption-like titles are vital to conveying this intricate meaning.

It is telling that Goldblatt preferred the word “structures,” a far looser term than “architecture,” to describe the forms he examined. He produced one of the most comprehensive photographic records of South Africa in his lifetime. But what he contemplated was the moral weight of everyday interactions, and it was through constructed and deconstructed landscapes, the values embedded in them and inhabitants' loaded connections to these spaces, that his subtle condemnation of segregationist politics took shape. As the curator Okwui Enwezor has observed, architecture as approached by Goldblatt was “as much about unbuilding as it was about building.”

Whether shot in the midst of cities or in South Africa's remotest regions, Goldblatt's images of the incomplete or abandoned invite consideration for their censure of the injustice and complacency that he diagnoses in his society, and the uneven social transformations still unfolding there. These photographs resonate, too, with the situations of other postcolonial countries grappling with past and current inequities. Indeed, South Africa and Australia are frequently linked as two nations where heavy economic reliance on resource extraction and complex histories of racial segregation tie closely to territorial dispossession. These commonalities undergirded Goldblatt's show in Sydney.

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To consider the critical power of the unfinished in Goldblatt's work is timely, then, in light of the recent exhibitions. My reading of his long engagement with “structure” is also prompted by studies of apartheid's spatial design, which have multiplied since the accession of Nelson Mandela to the presidency of South Africa in 1994. Geographers and urban historians have analyzed the relationship between apartheid and town planning with pathbreaking works such as Jennifer Robinson's *The Power of Apartheid: State Power and Space in South African Cities* (1996). More recently, the rise of memory and trauma studies has led to critical analyses of public monuments and museums that acknowledge apartheid's history. These projects include sites of cultural tourism such as the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg and the Nelson

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Mandela Museum in the Eastern Cape, as well as public commemorations like Pretoria's Freedom Park and community-led endeavors like the District Six Museum in Cape Town. Running parallel to this concern with the instrumental role of architecture under apartheid, however, are questions regarding the interpretive fixation on segregated urban design. For urban geographers Susan Parnell and Alan Mabin, "the uncritical application of very general ideas dealing with race and segregation entrenches a narrow, unimaginative framework." Such preoccupations tend to fetishize aggression and dominance as intrinsic to what the authors term "the South African city." This narrowing, in turn, links to a still more profound tendency outlined by Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael in *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies* (2000), in which the nation is "thought about and written about as separate from the rest of the world." A persistent focus on "separation and stratification, obscuring other co-existing configurations" has resulted, Nuttall and Michael argue, in a "theoretical closure that comes with seeing South Africa as a closed space."

These images of the incomplete or abandoned resonate with situations in other postcolonial countries as they grapple with past and current inequities.

Working collaboratively with the postcolonial scholar Achille Mbembe, Nuttall has sought to intervene in these stereotypes by emphasizing the cosmopolitanism or "citiness" of African capitals and municipalities. In their edited collection *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008), Mbembe and Nuttall consider the aesthetic experience of the "unfinished city" and its capacity to write modern-day Africa into the world, to challenge the perceived alterity of the continent. "Aesthetic experience" in this context encompasses diverse accounts of Johannesburg's sounds and rhythms, nuances in its literary and artistic representations, and the evolution of its architecture from the townships to generic mega-malls. Non-African readers, in particular, gain insights into Johannesburg's everyday complexity, countering the preoccupation with extremes of poverty and wealth, hyper-violence and crime, that all too frequently have characterized its coverage by western media.

While Goldblatt never aligned himself with any distinct theoretical approach to the analysis of cities, he was deeply interested in the aesthetics of cosmopolitan life. Indeed, there were moments during the country's turbulent 20th-century history when he drew criticism for adopting his dispassionate and anti-spectacular mode. He felt the tensions over political use of images most acutely during the liberation struggles of the 1980s, when a younger generation of photographers were encouraged by the African National Congress to use the camera as a weapon. Goldblatt never joined Afrapix, the agency representing these "struggle photographers," as they called themselves, nor did he place himself at the center of active conflict, as did the photographers of the Bang Bang Club in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the influence of photojournalism is evident in Goldblatt's adoption of reportorial techniques, notably his use of long explanatory titles to add layers of discursive information to his images. The work of captioning was rarely finished for Goldblatt, and each new exhibition or publication provided an opportunity to augment his titles with the clarity hindsight affords. These verbal supplements extend the basic facts of when and where a picture was taken by

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explaining the particulars of a scene, allowing viewers to glimpse the backstory outside the frame and beyond the instant of the shutter's click.

Some captions point to a generalized condition of brutality — as in the photograph of wooden crosses that is titled *Crosses erected by farmers in commemoration of those killed in farm murders and in protest against the frequency and violence of those crimes, Rietvlei, near Polokwane, Limpopo June 19, 2004* (2004). Others drive home the subjective impact of injustice. In the series *Jo'burg Intersections: Suburbs (1972-1985)*, we see Margaret Maroney, a non-white resident, pictured in her apartment with her young family drawn close to her in bed. But the cozy domesticity is offset by the title's cool disclosure that she was sentenced to R100 or 50 days imprisonment suspended for 3 years for living in this flat in a White Group Area, Orion Court Bree Street, December 1981 (1981).

From the intimacy of his early portraits of working-class Afrikaners (1962-68) and his brooding monochromes of the Randfontein gold mines (1966-72), to the banal evidence of racism he captured in the white suburb of Boksburg (1979-1980), and the color explorations of scarred lands from 1999 onwards, Goldblatt's photographs and their verbal frames are quietly damning rather than overtly confrontational. For the artist's long-time collaborator and friend, Nadine Gordimer, the potency of this contemplative, quasi-narrative approach lies in the fact that Goldblatt "does not sum up and take possession of South Africa" but rather "leads us into it." *Fietas Unbuilt*

The Johannesburg suburb officially named Pageview was once a multi-racial neighborhood with a substantial Indian population, colloquially known as Fietas after the "fitters" for men's clothing who traded in the area. But in 1957, when the Group Areas Act of 1950 was consolidated, non-white residents began receiving eviction notices; in 1962, Fietas was officially declared a neighborhood for "Whites." Some Indian and Malay residents fought relocation for more than a decade, and in the 1970s Goldblatt made a moving series of images here, documenting the suburb prior to the destruction of homes and businesses occupied by those resisters, who were at last on the cusp of forced removal to a suburb for "Asiatics." Unlike the razing of Sophiatown in 1955, which caused the swift and immediate relocation of families to the black township of Meadowlands (a part of Soweto), Fietas was altered but never fully rebuilt. In this tightly knit neighborhood once known for its bustling street life and bazaars, legal challenges resisting the seizure of properties were mounted well into the 1980s.

Goldblatt distills the 'modest and hidden complexity' in efforts by citizens to defend their homes and livelihoods against unjust laws.

In the early part of his career, Goldblatt had looked abroad to the pioneering photojournalism of magazines like *Life*, *Look*, and *Picture Post*, and his Fietas series reflects the conventions of street photography: a sidewalk trader tends to his tangle of wares; a father and daughter beam proudly over the counter of their family store; three men seated on the pavement glance casually at the camera while (as the title tells us) listening to the cricket commentary on a Saturday afternoon. As portraits of a neighborhood under the threat of imminent destruction,

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the Fietas series distills in photo-essay format the “modest and hidden complexity” in ordinary citizens’ efforts to defend their homes and livelihoods against unjust laws.

Goldblatt’s rejection of strict typologies results, in the Fietas series and others from this period, in eclectic subjects and styles, freely juxtaposing the improvisatory snapshot mode he uses to make residents’ portraits with more classically composed photographs of buildings. But even the images of unpeopled structures allude to the wave of dispossessions. At first glance there is little that is unusual, for example, in the photograph titled Hassimia Sahib’s Republic Islamic Butchery before its destruction under the Group Areas Act, Fietas, April 1977. The modest store has a weathered façade and faded signage. The bicycle leaning under the window next to a swung-open door suggests an active trade. Or perhaps it is Goldblatt’s own bike — in an outtake from the 2018 documentary, he recalls cycling through Fietas with a camera and lightweight tripod as the most convenient mode for making pictures of the neighborhood.

Turn to the title, however, and the ordinary scene is imbued with foreboding. The precise linear composition and frontal view hold the viewer’s focus on the relation of the building to the empty street, emphasizing the absence of passersby, the deserted atmosphere in which the store seems stranded. In his mature style from the 1970s onwards, Goldblatt surveyed scenes of latent injustice with what Michael Godby calls a “contemplative eye”; taken together, image and title solicit an intensity of looking in which, as Godby has noted, “the very clarity of the images, their pristine sharpness itself suggests significance, albeit without giving direction.”

While the photographer never aligned himself with any distinct theoretical approach to the analysis of cities, he was deeply interested in the aesthetics of cosmopolitan life.

More broadly, this photograph — and indeed the Fietas series as a whole — register Goldblatt’s receptivity to the ways in which the nation’s complicated mechanisms of power, or “dominion” as he termed it, are resisted in the commonplace. Goldblatt returned to Fietas over many years, capturing the aftermath of demolitions and the uncertain fate of buildings evading destruction. Consider the portrait of young Shireen Hussein, gazing pensively from the balcony of her family home. Goldblatt is often considered an heir to Depression-era photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, for whom the camera was a tool for social critique, and Shireen’s portrait recalls their frequent use of porches as a framing device. The fact that this image was taken in 1986, nearly three decades after the first eviction notices were issued to non-white families in Fietas, combines with the title’s statement that the girl’s family resisted removal under the Group Areas Act to help the viewer understand the image as a testament to resistance. The apparently peaceful scene becomes a powerful record of long-running opposition to apartheid, a militancy communicated with extreme subtlety through Shireen’s pose. She leans forward, suggesting youthful optimism and a defiant sense of belonging.

At the same time, the slightness of her build relative to the building looming behind her hints at the precarity of her situation. This ability to capture the political significance of gestures, postures, sites, and built forms with utmost austerity and simplicity was honed by Goldblatt over time:

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I've long since realized — it took me a few years to realize — that events in themselves are not so interesting to me as the conditions that led to the events. These conditions are often quite commonplace, and yet full of what is imminent. Immanent and imminent.

Hassimia Sahib, owner of the Islamic Butchery first photographed in 1977, was another among the Fietas resistors. Goldblatt photographed his shop again a decade later, still standing, but only just. The sequel image captures the butchery stripped of its signage, with its front door shut and barred — vestigial evidence of what was once a thriving neighborhood, transformed now into the inward-looking estate for whites that is visible in the background of the photograph. Hassimia Sahib's shop is itself visually arresting. But it is the caption-length title that tells us why the building was only partly razed:

With half of his building destroyed under the Apartheid regulation that had declared this suburb "White," Hassimia Sahib, butcher, continued trading and refused to move until given the site he had selected in the declared "Asiatic" suburb to which he was to be consigned. Housing for Whites already occupied. Pageview, Johannesburg. 8 March 1986.

The butcher's insistence on remaining is explained as a pragmatic rather than overtly rebellious action. Moreover, by describing the wider context, Goldblatt obstructs a purely visceral response to the destruction depicted in the photograph. The captioning information, in other words, is pivotal. By the same token, the picture itself can be read in the sense intended by James Agee in his preface to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) — a book that proved revelatory for Goldblatt in affirming the productive interrelationship of image and text. "The photographs," writes Agee, "are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative."

Karolina Ziebinska-Lewandowska, curator of the Pompidou exhibition, notes that "Goldblatt insists on the specific aspect of each of his photographs and asks of those who behold them to make the extra effort to immerse themselves in each situation, so as to avoid any simplification in their interpretation."

Goldblatt always stipulated that his full titles be included in presentations of the work, and this fastidious concern for the specificity of both text and image reveals not only the titles' educative function but their role in guarding against misinterpretation of the photographs. "I have little faith in the strength of these photographs to stand unaided," Goldblatt confessed — and, especially for viewers outside South Africa, the captions offer a path into the "ways, obsessions, graces, laws and particulars of this place and people."

Yet Goldblatt was equally alert to the limitations of language:

It would be beyond me to convey in any number of words, yet I wish that I could so concentrate these few that you would have the same intimate grasp of these images as any child or adult from Naledi or Dube, Yeoville or Fietas.

## The Politics of Presence

The impact of such captioning phrases can be disarming, leading the viewer to consider difficult truths — the painful reality of the scenes depicted and the impossibility, too, of fully grasping such scenes' significance. Goldblatt's pairings of word and image emphasize the limitations of both, their inability to redeem a difficult situation. It was in part this skepticism that led him to reject the use of photography in the service of explicit protest. Goldblatt confessed himself to be a "physical coward," and avoided graphic representation of the factional violence, authoritarianism, torture, and murder that plagued his nation during and after apartheid. Given that his peers risked their lives in covering such events, radical labels never sat comfortably with him: "I am not an activist," he states unequivocally in a 2015 interview.

In regard to demolished structures, this reluctance to shoot the bulldozers moving in or the protests and upheaval that preceded their arrival extends, too, to his depiction of demolition's aftermath.

Many of his images concerned with the destruction of housing during the 1970s and 1980s present us, rather, with visual puzzles. A photograph showing a mother and her child resting on a mattress with their shelter destroyed around them is unnerving, for instance, in its gallows humor. The table is strewn with bowls and cooking utensils as if the woman had been fixing a meal just moments before the cruel event, details that make the scene feel dreamlike. The caption supplies what Roland Barthes would term the photograph's *studium*, its historical or empirical content: Mother and child in their home after the destruction of its shelter by officials of the Western Cape Development Board Crossroads, Cape Town, 11 October 1984.

In addition to the extended titles, Goldblatt frequently worked up even longer texts to accompany his images. Sometimes these are presented as wall labels in exhibitions; others appear in publications, which offer more space for text. For this particular photograph, Goldblatt elaborated on conditions leading up to the demolition. He describes the makeshift home's materials — plastic sheets wrapped on a scaffolding of sturdy branches — and explains that while officials smashed the framework, the plastic was left where it fell, for by a quirk of the law the authorities are not permitted to confiscate or destroy the plastic sheets. The contents of the house remain untouched:

For a while the woman lay with the child. Then she got up and began to cut and strip the branches of Port Jackson bush to make a new framework for her house. The child slept. Like the photograph of Hassimia Sahib's dismantled store, this image speaks to the way in which legally complex systems of oppression may be riven with loopholes and inconsistencies. Goldblatt's images show how resilience and resourcefulness arise when "crisis has been made the everyday, thus leading those who produce the everyday to improvise practices of self-construction suited to large-scale uncertainty." And still, there is something profoundly uncomfortable in this image, a piercing effect or *punctum* — to draw again on Barthes' famous terminology.



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His images speak to ways in which legally complex systems of oppression may be riven with loopholes, how resilience and resourcefulness arise.

The punctum is an unstable response, prompted by an element in the image but unique to each viewer. For me, initially, it is the woman's unperturbed manner which I find most unsettling, her relaxed posture as she reclines with her sleeping child on the bed, as if nothing traumatic has transpired. Probing my discomfort critically, I reflect on the photographer's incursion into the woman's space at this vulnerable moment. We cannot know whether her back is turned on the camera out of disinterest or aversion, or if indeed she is even aware of Goldblatt's presence. Either way, Goldblatt is not immune from the "indelible burden of the white, privileged gaze," as Prudence Gibson and Emma Crott put it in their review of the MCA show in Sydney. This burden of guilt raises difficult questions about agency in the relationship between photographer and photographed.

### **Blue-Asbestos Mining**

Just as issues of gender and power are sometimes glossed over in discussions of Goldblatt's art, appraisals that seek to situate his oeuvre in a global context are outweighed in the literature by a focus on the geopolitical history of South Africa. This is due in part to the fact that even though his images circulate in the international art market, Goldblatt has insisted on the primacy of the local. He was drawn to collaboration with compatriots, among them the literary giant Nadine Gordimer, as well as Ivan Vladislavić, with whom he worked on *TJ/Double Negative* (2010), a joint project in which Vladislavić wrote a novel to accompany Goldblatt's images of Johannesburg. As he has put it, "My dialogue, to the extent that it went beyond myself, was with fellow South Africans." The tendency to see Goldblatt in relation to masters of social documentary such as the Farm Security Administration photographers or the German August Sander has limited comparisons with his contemporaries in Africa, or with non-white photographers working further afield.

It was thus important that the MCA curator Rachel Kent took the opportunity in Sydney to present *Wittenoom* (1999), a lesser-known series that Goldblatt shot on a trip to Western Australia (and absent from the 2018 Pompidou survey). The artist had travelled to the Outback ghost town to investigate the social and environmental impact of blue-asbestos (crocidolite) mining. During the apartheid years, he had worked in black-and-white, feeling that "colour seemed too sweet a medium to express the anger, disgust and fear that apartheid inspired." At *Wittenoom*, however, he needed color to capture the vivid blue asbestos fibers spread across the landscape. The resulting series is doubly pivotal: one of Goldblatt's few projects exploring sites outside South Africa, and his first major cycle in color.

These images from Australia and South Africa are aesthetically rich yet unromanticized documents of territories marked by trauma.

Australia shares with South Africa a troubling history of blue-asbestos mining. Just prior to the industry's peak in the 1970s, South Africa accounted for 97% of global output, with the remaining 3% sourced from *Wittenoom*. The Australian mine was closed in 1966. (South Africa



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continued to mine and export crocidolite until 1996.) A generation later, Goldblatt's project at Wittenoom was both personal and historical. He had been affected by the loss of a close friend to the asbestos-linked cancer mesothelioma, and an invitation from the Art Gallery of Western Australia to contribute to an exhibition prompted him to travel to the town. Upon his return to South Africa, he embarked on another series examining the aftermath of blue-asbestos mining on the post-apartheid landscape in his own country.

Goldblatt has stressed the culpability of both nations in allowing asbestos-mining companies to remain "contemptuous of the health and lives of those who mined, milled, packed and shipped the material and of the land from which they took it." The Australian government moved more swiftly than its South African counterpart to ban blue-asbestos mining. This followed years of inertia, however, and Goldblatt's Wittenoom images from 1999 capture the mix of denial, neglect, and concealment that has marked Australia's reaction to abandoned tailings in the gorges of the Pilbara region. At Wittenoom, the government has buried much of the waste and sought to literally wipe the town from the map (it was officially unincorporated in 2007).

Yet the business of making reparations is far from finished. From the eerie scene of a rusted children's swing set to the signs at the edge of town warning visitors away, Goldblatt's Wittenoom images present aesthetically rich yet unromanticized documents of territories marked by trauma. Like so many of Goldblatt's landscapes, these understated images of an arid Outback may appear unexceptional at first glance. Again, the titles or captions are instrumental, allowing reader-viewers to feel the ripple effects of a pathogenic terrain. In one particularly sparse photograph, in which the gridded composition focuses our attention on an unassuming mound of bricks, we learn that we are looking at:

The remains of the hospital after demolition and burying of its rubble. It stood on a hill above the town. It had 'shady trees, wide roof and big verandahs,' a matron's house, nurses' quarters, morgue, operating theatre, delivery room, autoclave and X-ray facilities. Wittenoom, August 1999.

Like the Fietas series, Wittenoom is a portrait not just of a place, but of its people. There is a tenderness in Goldblatt's portraits of residents who refused to vacate the town, posed in front of their homes and gardens or standing unaffectedly in the grounds of the Wittenoom weather and power stations. Goldblatt himself grew up among the goldmining estates of Randfontein, west of Johannesburg, where some of his earliest experiments with photography were inspired by industrial infrastructure. In the 1960s, his professional emergence was aided by commissions for photographic essays from mining companies such as the Anglo-American Corporation. These were morally complicated assignments, and later publications such as *On the Mines* (1973), with its portraits of miners in the tunnels as well as in the hostels where they were housed, were not an endorsement of the industry; they were rather an inquiry into what Goldblatt has described as the mines' "overwhelming presence in the life and landscape into which I grew." With that said, it was only later in life, as he came to fully appreciate the devastating impact of mining on human health and the environment, that the photographer became an outspoken critic of the industry. Speaking with the writer Jonathan Cane in 2015, he concedes:

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I did things for the mining houses that, in the light of what I now understand better, I should not have done, and should have refused those assignments, those commissions, or I should have handled them differently.

The expanded critical potential that color brings to Goldblatt's post-1999 landscapes is especially evident in the images of the South African mining belt that he made after the Wittenoom visit. The large-format photograph *Highly carcinogenic blue asbestos waste on the Owendale Asbestos Mine tailings dump, near Postmasburg, Northern Cape (2002)*, for instance, radiates a luminous beauty; the fine netting of blue-asbestos fibers resembles a layer of snow dusted on the rubble. But such aesthetic seduction is interrupted by the shock of discovering, via the extended caption information, that this angel hair is in fact highly carcinogenic waste dumped where it can blow around in the open air. The camera's closeness to the toxic tailings lends the image a claustrophobic effect intensified by knowledge of the tailings' proximity to people: on the day that this photograph was taken, we are told, the prevailing wind was in the direction of the mine officials' houses at right. The text's matter-of-fact tone suggests that this scene is far from exceptional; lethal exposure had become simply part of daily life in the asbestos mountains of South Africa's Northern Cape.

### **"Fuck-All Landscapes"**

In the early 2000s, after the Wittenoom series, Goldblatt began to explore not only the possibilities of color but also the technical potential of the digital medium. This transition from film to digital led, as Michael Stevenson observes, to a "whole-hearted embrace of harsh South African light, a light that is intense and unrelenting." At the same time, a shift in scale takes the viewer from the intimate domesticity of the black-and-white work to a feeling of expansiveness in the color panoramas, a confrontation with apparently unbounded space that invites the eye to rove around the surface of the image.

After apartheid, as the nation turned to constructing a new identity, Goldblatt explored the liminal territory of peri-urban towns and rugged topographies in the interior.

After apartheid, as the attention of the nation turned to constructing a new collective identity, Goldblatt began to explore the liminal territory of South Africa's peri-urban towns and the rugged topographies of its interior. Fascinated by the stony hills of the "koppies," isolated farms framed by miles of gaunt fencing, and the cemeteries and makeshift memorials that proliferated during the AIDS epidemic, Goldblatt traversed the country making large-format color images with an intense focus on land — "its division, possession, use, misuse. How we have shaped it and how it has shaped us." He sustained an interest in cities and architecture, as the Art21 program attests, and his preoccupation in the last two decades of his life with what he called "fuck-all landscapes" reflects his search for a visual language suited to contemplation of his nation's uncertain fate, the precarity of a newfound democracy. These photographs consider what Mzuzile Mduduzi Xakaza describes as "the exploitation of the human body and the environment in the context of the capitalist economy."

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Capitalist aggression combined with the failure of government to equitably redistribute land, wealth, and resources is felt, once more, in images of unfinished buildings. In Schubartpark, Pretoria (2016), Goldblatt reverts to black-and-white to shoot a cluster of skeletal residential towers in which, after years of mismanagement, Gradually everything that could be removed — doors, windows, plumbing, fittings — were stolen. Other images stress the absence of variation

or any sense of place in the sprawl of housing estates. With its monotonous rows of mass-produced spec houses abandoned mid-construction, *Incomplete Houses, Part of a Stalled Municipal Development of 1000 Houses* (2006) is dystopian. Another image taken in the same location tells a more hopeful story. The incomplete houses are visible in the background, but we focus on the remains of a children's game called "onopopi," in the form of a pattern of found stones. The image is joyful in its appreciation of improvised play.

"It is almost impossible now to find a pristine landscape," Goldblatt has said. "The grass has been grazed to the point of being threadbare, crops come and go, roads traverse, fences divide, and mines penetrate and throw up the scabs of their detritus. These and our structures are the marks of our presence. I am drawn by the intimacies of our association with this land." Goldblatt's acknowledgment of such "intimacies" speaks to the twofold nature of his color-photographic narratives. On the one hand, he deconstructs the ways in which the South African landscape has for centuries been constructed as "empty" according to European and colonial schemas. At the same time, his images are inflected with an ambivalent postcolonial sense of belonging to that "empty" land.

These images bring to the fore unfinished processes of decolonization that are not just South African, but global.

There is of course no "empty" land — not in South Africa, or anywhere. As an Australian viewer, it is impossible for me not to recognize something of home in the vast open spaces of Goldblatt's color images from the South African hinterlands, not only because of the similarities in geography and climate, but also because of what transpired here when the British made their own declaration about a "fuck-all landscape" — a terra nullius. This acknowledgement of the colonial past frames the reception of Goldblatt's work in Australia. His images are not simply archival documents of another time and another place. Goldblatt's photographs of indeterminate structures and landscapes bring to the fore the unfinished processes of decolonization, which are not just South African but global.

If we are to "overturn predominant readings of Africa," Mbembe and Nuttall argue, "we need to identify sites within the continent, entry and exit points not usually dwelt upon in research and public discourse, that defamiliarize commonsense readings of Africa." The subtle yet complex force of the "unbuilt" in Goldblatt's work offer one such non-traditional entry point. It may be tempting to elevate Goldblatt to the status of an authority on the nation that he photographed for more than seventy years. But this is to risk narrowing critique at a time when it most needs to broaden — recognizing Goldblatt's links to other regions, people and points of view, and the quiet challenge his art poses to inequities that are far from localized.

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**Author's Note**

David Goldblatt: Structures of Dominion and Democracy, edited by Karolina Ziebinska-Lewandowska, was published by Steidl on the occasion of the retrospective at the Pompidou Centre (February 21 to May 7, 2018). The monograph Fietas Fractured is also forthcoming from Steidl. Curated by Rachel Kent, David Goldblatt: Photographs, 1948-2018, was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (October 19, 2018 to March 3, 2019).

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