Billy Monk

In the late 1960s anyone who frequented the Catacombs, a seedy nightclub near the docks of Cape Town, knew Billy Monk (1937–1982). A bouncer with no formal training in photography, Monk began making pictures of the club’s patrons in 1967. Although these photographs now exist as powerful records of after-hours Cape Town life in the mid-twentieth century, they were not conceived with a documentary impulse—Monk made these portraits with the simple intent of selling them to his subjects. Using a Pentax camera, fine-grain film, and a small flash, he captured the rich details of the club and its eclectic inhabitants. The intimacy and honesty of these highly graphic, carefully composed photographs reflect his own position as a participant in the club scene, where he was a friendly voyeur rather than an outside observer.

Monk’s Catacombs portraits reveal the subculture that thrived in that aptly named place, which provided temporary escape from the oppressive prohibitions imposed by South Africa’s Immorality Act of 1957 and subsequent provisions outlawing interracial coupling, open expressions of homosexuality, and other “deviant” behaviors. Monk’s brief project ended in 1969, when he abandoned photography as he had so many occupations over the course of his life. In 1979 South African photographer Jac de Villiers stumbled across files containing negatives and contact sheets from the Catacombs shoots in Monk’s former studio. With Monk’s blessing, de Villiers, together with photographer Andrew Meintjes, printed a selection of the pictures for an exhibition at the Market Gallery in Johannesburg in 1982. Today Monk’s work continues to offer a unique view of South Africa’s social history under apartheid.
Ernest Cole (1940–1990) was a self-taught photographer who started out at Drum, a pictorial weekly intended for the black African community. He gradually developed a financially precarious but dedicated career—he was, in fact, probably the first black freelance photojournalist in South Africa. Because Cole's ability to study was restricted by the Bantu Education Act of 1953—which legislated a curriculum for Blacks that was designed to produce servants and manual laborers rather than people equipped for a modern, technologically advanced world—he learned his craft through a correspondence course. After receiving Henri Cartier-Bresson’s book The Decisive Moment (probably in 1959), he set out to pursue a book of his own describing the life experiences of his fellow black South Africans. It was an extremely dangerous pursuit, and many of the pictures were made secretly or deceptively. Eventually, in 1966, Cole was forced to flee. He took numerous prints with him; the rest were later smuggled out by friends. His book, House of Bondage: A South African Black Man Exposes in His Own Pictures and Words the Bitter Life of His Homeland Today, was published the following year. It sold out in the United States and was immediately banned in South Africa.

Like those of others who left the country to escape the depredations of apartheid, Cole's life after 1967 was tragic. He ultimately came to the United States but was deeply disillusioned by the racial injustice he experienced here. The original prints for House of Bondage were discovered in Sweden in the 1990s, and in 2006 David Goldblatt encouraged the Hasselblad Foundation to organize a show and publish a book of Cole's work. Unlike the pictures in the 1967 publication, the prints included here are not cropped to achieve immediacy. Instead, they respect the inclusive compositions Cole intended, giving a measure of contemplation to the cruel conditions under which he and his fellow black South Africans lived.
Goldblatt has cited South African literature—in particular the work of Nadine Gordimer (b. 1923) and Herman Charles Bosman (1905–1951)—as a major influence on his practice. Tellingly, Goldblatt describes himself as “a self-appointed observer and critic of the society into which I was born, with a tendency towards doing honor or giving recognition to what is often overlooked or unseen.” His interest in surfacing such aspects of post-apartheid life through storytelling and the pairing of text and image is deeply mined in the series *Ex-Offenders* (2009–10), on view in the previous gallery. Made, with few exceptions, at the sites where the crimes occurred, these portraits of ex-prisoners and offenders on parole tell complex and difficult stories.

Goldblatt has also had a long-standing interest in the landscape of South Africa, traveling thousands of miles to observe the far reaches of his native country. He has written of these expeditions: “I felt no driving need to record those situations and moments of extremity that were the stuff of the media. It was to the quiet and commonplace, where nothing ‘happened’ and yet all was contained and imminent, that I was most drawn.” That impulse has been a consistent thread in works ranging from *In Boksburg* to the recent series *Intersections*. This later series includes views—pictured from three distinct perspectives—of intersections that seemingly lie in the middle of nowhere.
In the late 1970s and early 1980s the distinctive regionalism that once marked small-town life in South Africa was replaced by a more international, corporate character, as in the United States, as the spread of banking concerns, chain stores, and generic subdivisions transformed the national landscape. In 1979 and 1980 Goldblatt visited Boksburg, a modest bedroom community of Johannesburg, to make photographs of its white, middle-class residents as their town’s character was changing. He was interested in the community’s quotidian culture: a shirtless man mowing his lawn, a girl in a tutu en pointe on her front porch, a couple at a ballroom dance class. These people seem utterly familiar—they could be the residents of a northern California suburb. But Boksburg is a town in South Africa, a country, at that time, of extreme racial segregation. For decades the borders of its white community were described with the precision of a surveyor, as delineated in the color-coded map on the entry wall of the exhibition.

By explicitly excluding black and “colored” populations except as workers or invited visitors, Boksburg was, as Goldblatt states, effectively “shaped by white dreams and white proprieties.” Within his pictures of this artificial cocoon, we find glimpses of the others: the black spectators of the Miss Lovely Legs contest, an interracial gathering at the Methodist Church, and the tense meeting of the Worker-Management Liaison Committee of the Colgate-Palmolive company. Although on one level Goldblatt’s Boksburg pictures seem to describe a kind of life that many of us know very well, they are also a highly contained description of apparent normalcy—and a lifestyle of extreme racial privilege—under the violently racist apartheid system.
Ex-Offenders

Very many South Africans have been the victims of crime, often violent. Either we have suffered it personally or we know someone close who has. With much stress and considerable expenditure of income we try to protect our persons and property. Yet nevertheless we remain extremely vulnerable to attack by people who would seize our property and damage or end our lives.

Having been a victim of armed robbers, muggers, and thieves, I asked myself, who are the people who are doing this to us? Are they monsters? Ordinary people? Could they be my children? Are they you and me? I wanted to burrow under the statistics and meet some of these doers of crime as individuals. I wanted to do portraits and ask, Who are you, what makes you tick, what did you do, how did you come to do it, what do you think of what you did, what will you do now?

Whom to photograph and where? Even if I could meet active criminals they would not be likely to agree to being photographed or to answering such questions. I did not want to photograph prisoners in jail. I wanted to meet perpetrators as “ordinary” people—such as one might encounter in a street or supermarket. And I wanted to do this in situations that were somehow related to the crimes they had committed or of which they had been accused.

So I came to people who had been accused of crime, found guilty, and been punished. If they had been in prison, they were now free or on parole. Where to do the portraits? It seemed to me that the scene of crime would likely be a place of special significance. Life-changing events were probably experienced there. So, with the exception of two portraits that I did at the place of arrest, I have been doing the photographs at the scene of the crime.

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.

David Goldblatt