

## LIFE

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# Mining gold's legacy via Goldblatt's lens

● A year after his death, the photographer's work of 50 years ago urges us to listen to the voices of mineworkers, still relevant in the era of cryptocurrency

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In the negotiations at Lonmin's Marikana mine in 2012, one of the rockdrill operators demanding R12,500 a month approached a manager he knew: "Please help us!" he pleaded. When the manager recounted this story to a mutual friend, his eyes welled up: over the loss of life for so small a sum given the salaries earned by executives; over his inability to mediate given the way the mining industry tallies the cost of labour against the fluctuating values of metals and currencies. The manager was "broken", "because he understood the real value of that drill operator in a way the shareholders couldn't. There would be no platinum if it weren't for him. There would be no mining industry if it weren't for him."

I thought of this story as I stood at the Norval Foundation in Cape Town, before David Goldblatt's 50-year-old *On the Mines* photographs. Many are well-known individually, but here they are in a full set, bought by the collector Louis Norval. Goldblatt died a year ago at 87 and prepared this exhibition, though he did not live to see it.

Goldblatt's dispassionate, humane eye has provided a visual conscience for this country, and it began with these unforgettable works. They document what is at the core of SA's economy and society; the bedrock seam runs – like the mines themselves – beneath our collective unconscious. Something we turn away unless we are forced to confront it, as we were in the aftermath of the Marikana massacre.

"Below ground", wrote Nadine Gordimer in an essay accompanying the photographs (she and Goldblatt collaborated on the project), was a place of "the subconscious, from where what matters most in human affairs never comes up to light, or does so disguised as coarse sentiment or expedience, patronage or indifference".

Along with the coarse sentiment comes up fine sediment too: the dust that makes the Witwatersrand's "own landscape... of waste and water", as Gordimer puts it – and that has settled in generations of mineworkers' lungs. The latter has caused what the University of Cape Town Lung Institute's Dr Neil Ellis calls "an epidemic without precise parallel in history, when its extent in terms of duration, intensity and magnitude are all taken into account".

Ellis's words are cited in a disturbing and eerily beautiful new documentary, *Dying for Gold*, which comes out of the landmark class-action suit filed on behalf of mineworkers with silicosis and their dependants. In July, a court is expected to approve a settlement of at least R5bn, to be paid out to claimants over the next 12 years. According to *Dying for Gold*, 500,000 gold mineworkers in SA and its neighbouring countries "are dying of silicosis and tuberculosis today". Catherine Meyburgh and Richard Pakleppa, the filmmakers, have no qualms in using the word "genocide".

Back in 1966 Goldblatt took a photograph of a pile of shovels



**Speaking to us mutely:** Mineworkers outside their hostel at Western Deep Level mine in Carletonville, in the then Transvaal (1970). / Courtesy The David Goldblatt Legacy Trust and Goodman Gallery

retrieved from a mine in his home town, Randfontein. They are stacked, not by design but for convenience, into a structure reminiscent of a Holocaust memorial. In the way it echoes "the residue of shoes, suitcases" left behind at death camps, as curator Karel Nel put it to me. Nel marvelled at the way the shovels conjure "the hand, the life, at the end of each handle", clearing out the matter, spade-ful by spade-ful, that would in many cases kill them.

"They never told us the dusty conditions underground are dangerous," Bangumzi Balakazi says in *Dying for Gold*. "This dust is very fine, much like flour, by my understanding. Because by the time you're aware of it you already have silicosis. Only science can see this fine dust, not us."

Science – and the camera, perhaps. The centrepiece of *On the Mines* is "Shaft-sinking", a series of underground photographs. Shot on high-speed film with only ambient light available – from a worker helmet or filtering down from the surface – they are expressionist masterpieces, far more abstract than Goldblatt's sharply focused above-ground work. Their graininess is due to the speed of the film, but they seem to catch light filtering through invisible particles, and thus the deadly invisible atmosphere being inhaled.

In one photograph Goldblatt depicts workers ducking and dodging a cactus grab, with

horror-movie claws, pulling up shattered rock and dumping it in a 3m-high bucket called a kibble. I thought of what mineworker Liao Manyokole says in *Dying for Gold* about his fear of the "frightening mining machines really putting me in danger". The young worker – who replaced his father sent home with silicosis in the killing cycle of migrant labour – describes the noise made by the loader: "I asked myself, 'Is it a pig? What thing would make such a noise?'"

## GOLD'S VALUE IS BASED ON STORED LABOUR. THIS QUEST, OF DIGGING SO DEEP, AND WHAT IT COSTS IN TERMS OF PEOPLE'S LIVES AND ENERGY

In another image, the cactus grab is abstracted by the dusty light into a form resembling a cathedral vault; the huge kibble an altar. The men, sweeping up the shattered rock, look like they are in abeyance. Nothing in these images is as it is on the surface. Tubes of hose are some satanic intestine; perspectives are nightmarishly steep; a rockface overwhelms tiny beings; sometimes you wonder if you are looking at science fiction. Is there a difference – in hubris and in confidence – between "man's" quest up into space, and that down into the

centre of the earth?

As we looked at these images, Nel told me about his journeys in the Pacific, and particularly an island called Yap. Nel is a collector of precolonial currency, and Yap is famous for its stone money: calcite disks called Rai, sometimes 4m in diameter, with a hole drilled through so they could be carried on poles back from where they were mined on Palau, 100km away. "The stones were heavy and the sea journey was dangerous. Sometimes the men didn't make it back," Nel said. "And that's what gave these disks their value: it was a quest, a challenge."

Their value was in what Nel calls "stored labour", a concept first defined by the 18th-century philosopher David Hume. We spoke about how gold's value was similarly based on stored labour: "This quest," as Nel put it, "of digging so deep into the earth, and what it costs in terms of people's lives and energy."

In Yap, the value of Rai was calculated not only through the labour it took to craft and cart it, but its history too: an oral account, passed down through the generations, of how it was made and traded. Contrast this with the alienation of gold in capitalist society, dug up from deep underground, benefitted, and then sunk again at Fort Knox to back up paper currency. The gap between intrinsic worth and value becomes even greater as we enter the age of cryptocurrency.

Try as I may – I am not an economist – I cannot get my head around the way gold's value is set, particularly after the end of the gold standard. But when I understand the value of gold as residing in its "stored labour" it makes devastating sense. We flash our own wealth – our own understanding of "value" – in the trinkets we wear around our necks or on our fingers, but we have no connection at all to the real value of these adornments: the work that went into making them. Goldblatt's work restores that value, as does *Dying for Gold* and the settlement won on behalf of hundreds of thousands of workers who are ill or have died from lung disease.

Certainly, Goldblatt's restorative project has its limits. Much of his professional work came from the mines – he did annual reports for Anglo American – and this supported him, and undoubtedly helped him with access: he readily acknowledged his complicity, as a white South African, in the apartheid system. Also, in the culture of the day, he did not take down names (of black workers or white ones) and the only two people named among the portraits of *On the Mines* are Harry Oppenheimer, the Anglo chair, and Butch Britz, the master sinker who took Goldblatt down the mine.

Oppenheimer is shot from above, diminutive and uncomfortable in a leather armchair; "the only photo in the



**Hard work:** "Lashing" shovels retrieved from underground. Every grain of sand in the yellow tailings dumps that made the Witwatersrand landscape and every grain of gold that made its wealth, came from a rock off a black man's shovel underground. Central Salvage Yard, Randfontein Estates, Randfontein, 1966 / Courtesy The David Goldblatt Legacy Trust and Goodman Gallery

collection which exhibits judgment", Nel says. If Goldblatt looks down on Oppenheimer, he puts himself on the same level as everyone else, or even beneath them: from Britz with his weary and knowing look, or the gentle male nurse lost in troubled reverie, to the spanner man balancing virility with vulnerability. We cannot but view them as fellow mortals.

He has a similar rapport with nature, and for this reason his landscapes of a Witwatersrand ravaged by mining possess a startling beauty. It has been called an anti-aesthetic, in that he finds the pleasing form in ugly things. But his landscapes carry moral weight too, in the

way they dispassionately record the way industrialisation violated the earth, long before this became the urgent imperative it is today.

The most intriguing of the portraits are a series Goldblatt took, one Sunday, at a mine dance arena. He was annoyed that the manager had instructed the men to show up in their traditional gear, he tells us in a caption: "I had no desire to do ethnographic 'studies' and was preparing to withdraw." But then he saw that the men "took the occasion very seriously and with great dignity. And so I photographed several groups."

In a quietly subversive way. In fact, what he did was to let

**Suffering unabated:** On August 16 2012 policemen shot striking mineworkers of the Lonrho platinum mines, killing 34 and wounding 78 in seemingly wild shooting without good cause. The men were shot, some with their hands up in surrender, within a radius of about 300m of this koppie on which they met. Beyond is the Lonrho smelter, which stood idle during the strike. Marikana, North-West Province (May 11 2014). / Courtesy The David Goldblatt Legacy Trust and Goodman Gallery

passers-by and observers, clad in everyday wear, bleed into the posed images of the dressed-up men. And so in a low-angle photograph of warriors on a wall with staffs and a shield, you see a kid peeking at the photographer, only head and pork-pie hat above the wall. In another, the putative subjects are two muscular men, naked but for worn old shoes and skins around their midriffs. They would be ethnographic "noble savages" were it not for the others clustered around them, crowding the picture in with a range of expressions and attitudes far too big to be contained in the square frame of a Hasselblad.

Sitting next to the impassive warriors is a young man almost crumpled in on himself, eyes behind thick-framed glasses. Both his gaze and his posture resist the photographer, and in my imagination the man is a teacher, a trade unionist, or an educated clerk. Of course, the glasses might be mine-hospital issue rather than Lumumba wannabe, but the gaze is unmistakable. The man challenges Goldblatt and us too, across the decades, we the viewers who do not even know his name, here on the pages of Business Day, or in the R1,400 catalogue of the show, or on the walls of a museum built by a private collector with the money he made as a property developer, enough money to buy a whole set of these gorgeous silver gelatin prints that fetch on average R200,000 each on the art market.

Is Goldblatt's work "worth it"? One of the pleasures of this exhibition is the experience of his own "stored labour": the time and care he has taken in making each of these images; the life's project of his work. But still, particularly as it sits in the Norval Foundation opulence, you cannot but think how his value is determined not only by its role as SA's visual conscience, but by what collectors are willing to pay.

In 2012 the sociologist Asanda Benya spent some time working underground, in a Rustenburg platinum mine, as part of her research on women in mining. After personally experiencing "the physically excruciating and mentally unforgiving work", she often wondered "whether it was all worth it – whether the price they were paying was perhaps not too high for the rewards they were getting".

● *'On the Mines', an exhibition by David Goldblatt, with text by Nadine Gordimer, will be at the Norval Foundation in Cape Town until August 11.*



**Store of memories:** Nurse, Consolidated Main Reef mine hospital, Roodoepoort (1966). / Courtesy The David Goldblatt Legacy Trust and Goodman Gallery